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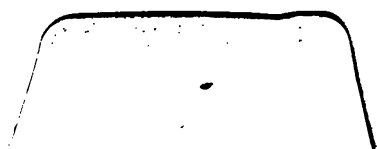
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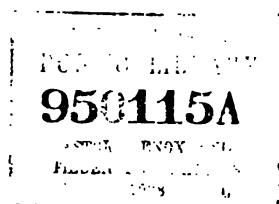
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PETER'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

"But God forbid but that men should believe
Well more thing than men have seen with eye!
Men shall not weenen ev'rything a lie
But of himself it seë'th, or else do'th;
For, God wot, thing is never the less sooth,
Though ev'ry wightë may it not y-see.
Bernard the Monkë saw not, all, par die!"

"So you really mean settling down here?" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, bending a scrutinizing eye upon her visitor. She is sitting, as usual, on her high-backed chair, an Elizabethan structure. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss thinks lounges bad for the morals; she told her brother, Sir Stephen Wortley, yesterday, that half the immoralities of the present age were accounted for by the modern chair.

"Well—for the present—yes, I really think so," returns the pretty woman under examination. She gives Mrs. Cutforth-Boss a charming smile, that is as generous as it is sweet, as it lasts right through all her soft hesitations.

"It's a dull country," says her cousin, in a flat sort of way.

"Yes—I know; but dulness is not always undesirable!" The pretty woman, whose name is "Chance," casts a carefully tender look at her sombre clothes, and sighs delightfully. "I should quite *treasure* a little rest, a little quiet."

"You'll get plenty of both here," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, "ad nauseam!" Her tone is uncompromising; there is something in it, indeed, that points to the idea

that perhaps she is undesirous of having her freshly-widowed cousin in a neighbourhood where she will be obliged to see her constantly. Bella Chance (her maiden name was Grant, and so was Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's) had made a remarkably bad marriage. Mrs. Boss, on the contrary, had made a remarkably good one. Cousins who have got on in life are not always all things to the cousins who have gone to the wall. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, for example, did not see why her good marriage should be used to defray the expenses that Society is sure to exact from a bad one. She understood perfectly why Bella Chance had come here to this particular part of the county—to whitewash herself and her disreputable husband's memory with the respectability of Mr. Cutforth-Boss.

The latter was the meekest of men, and his wife felt he would be of little use to her in the staying of the invader. Give him

“ A booke and a shadie nooke
Eyther in-a-doore or out;
With the grene leaves whisp'ring over hede,
Or the streete cryes all about,”

and he would ask nothing more of you. A man of letters—a dainty searcher into past and musty volumes—lying so delicately in their dust that never dies—in fact, a happy bookworm! It was a most merciful interposition of Providence that had married Mrs. Cutforth-Boss to the man who bore that name, as undoubtedly she would have killed any other man. As for *him*, he was impervious to all evils, save those that touched him through his beloved tomes.

“How lovely,” says the widow, with the sweetest air of thankfulness. “But I shall have even *more* than rest and quiet, Maria, I shall have *you*!”

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss regards her with amazement. Is she clever, or only a fool? Sometimes it is very hard to decide between the two! She herself, however, is very clever in her own way.

“That is beyond dispute,” says she calmly. “I reside here.” In her tone there is nothing of the annoyance that she is feeling, nothing of her belief that Bella would never have chosen to live in that little house at one end

of the village if she, Maria, had not been living in the big one at the other end of it.

"That is what brought me," says Mrs. Chance, her large, pale blue eyes suffused. "When—when I lost *him*—I—" her lips quiver, she makes a hurried gesture and, finding her handkerchief, lets her face fall into it—"I—lost *all*!"

"There wasn't so much to lose, was there?" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who disdains to practise the delicate art called Tact. "Two hundred a year covered it, didn't it? and that only when he'd got some practice. If I were you, Bella, I should look things in the face, and give up those clothes," pointing to the crape veil and other signs of woe. "You'll find them expensive."

"I'm thinking of it," says Bella meekly. The slender hands are folded on her lap, her eyes are on her hands.

"Very wise. I hope he left you something."

"His memory!" says the widow, with an exquisite air of grief combined with courage. "What can I want more?"

"Memories leave one hungry!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in her low, bass tones, now basser than usual.

"Oh, no!" says the widow, lifting her pretty head and smiling at her cousin reproachfully. "They leave one *rich*."

"For Heaven's sake," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, breaking all at once into open indignation, "have common sense! If your late husband has left you nothing but his memory, how do you think you are going to live? On *it*? My good girl, there have been many memories, but I do not remember one of them that, if taken alone, would have been strong enough to supply the possessor of it with daily bread. The widows of memories die in the poor-house, as a rule!"

"I don't think I shall die in a poor-house," says Mrs. Chance sweetly.

"No? But if you have nothing——!"

"You are always in such a hurry," says the other; she looks as amused as one can dare to look in such sad habiliments as she is wearing. "Poor darling George was entitled to four thousand pounds before I married him. It was to come from an uncle of his. The uncle on George's marriage was always threatening to change

his will—but he forgot to do it—and *he* died the week before—my poor, dear George!”

“That,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, after a quick run through her arithmetical knowledge, “was very considerate of him; still that four thousand, considering the iniquitously low rate of interest one can get now, will give you only a hundred and fifty a year, at the outside.”

“Yes, I know. How clever you are! But Alec has just come back from India, and he has promised to stay with me during his leave——”

“Your brother—but he——”

“He has been invalided home, you know, and he seems very pleased with this part of the world. I hope he will stay with me. He——” Her little usual hesitation comes on again. “He—you understand——”


“He is going to allow you so much while he remains with you,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss promptly, “and you count upon him to enable you to keep up the cottage?”

“Yes. How *very* clever you are. Dear old Alec! He says he will stay until his return to India—a year perhaps, or more—but young men are so uncertain! I wish, Maria, you would say a word to him——”

“Certainly not!” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, in her most strident tones. “When I speak, I speak to the point—I say at once all I want to say, and it would be quite impossible to say all *I* want to say in a word! And as for your brother, he must think himself very far gone towards death indeed, to want to come and rusticate here.”

“It’s his chest, he says.”

“Chest or no chest, I never saw any young man look so well as Alec did when I met him yesterday. He was down by the river, and he had his boots and socks off, and was wading into the water to get a fly that had caught in something. He seemed as well as anyone I ever met in my life, and very much more indecent. His legs were all over the place. I particularly noted them. They were horrid, and naked, but they were *brown*! I am perfectly certain that the government is being thoroughly swindled over these young men who come home yearly from India, and who describe themselves as being in the last stage of consumption, but are, nevertheless, equal to fly-fishing the day after their arrival.”



of the village if she, Maria, had not been living in the big one at the other end of it.

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with their tongue.' If they dared to be uncivil, nobody would go to their houses—that is, nobody who was anybody. And they only care to entertain the 'Anybodies.' However, she is very useful about coal funds and clothing clubs."

"There was a very pretty woman at her party yesterday," says Mrs. Chance. "I forget her name. Oh! here is Alec—he'll remember it."

Going to the open window, she beckons with her hand to a young man who is coming towards the house, across the beautiful lawn—studded here and there with giant beech trees—that is one of the glories of Cutforth Hall. There have been Cutforths at the Hall for over five hundred years. The Boss was added fifty years ago, and brought a great deal of gold with it.

"He has walked up?" says Maria.

"Yes. He promised to call for me and take me home; I told him I should leave after tea."

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss rises smartly, and rings the bell.

"We should have had tea before," says she. But it is not apology that is in her tone.

CHAPTER II.

"Like one
Who having, unto truth, by telling of it
Made such a sinner of his memory
To credit his own lie."

"You have come, Alec?" says Mrs. Chance, giving a little friendly nod to her brother, as he steps into the room. It is the usual idiotic remark.

"Yes," says Alec, nodding to her in turn. "How d'ye do?" says he, turning to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss.

"Quite well, thank you. Have some tea?" Her tone is magisterial as ever, but there certainly is a softening in it. This young man, the brother of the *very* poor Bella, had distinguished himself in some little ways in India. He had been described by his Colonel as a rising young officer, and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss feels lenient to-

wards him. Besides all this, he is very good-looking, and there is a touch of sauciness in his gay blue eyes that, in some strange way, attracts this queer, rough, managing woman.

"Thank you. Cutforth out?"

"He is studying a volume belonging to the thirteenth century, that has just come under his notice," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss with dignity. She tries to throw indifference into her air, but it is impossible not to perceive that she derives great pride out of her husband's literary tastes.

To him, she scoffed at them during the occasional moments when they found themselves *tête-à-tête*; which were rare indeed—Cutforth's sanest movements being in the direction of avoiding her. But to the world she posed as the wife of a true *savant*. Perhaps she would not have admired her "true *savant*" so much if he had taken any hold upon the establishment—if he had dared to interfere with the pros and cons of the domestic arrangements; Maria was a managing woman, and would brook no rivalry in her own line.

She managed everything in Cutforth Hall, from basement to attic—housemaids' room, butler's pantry, nothing was sacred from her. Husband, servants, tenantry, all alike were under her dominion. They ran a daily race in a daily groove—and it was *her* groove. Her children, thank Heaven, were—*nil*! She would have managed them into the most impossible grooves!

Even her friends did not escape her managing tendencies. There are always some weak members in every community, who fall an easy prey to the strong-minded; and many were her victims amongst the young matrons and the foolish virgins of Bigley-on-Sea.

Now and then there had been a revolt against her in the parish, but the Mistress of Cutforth Hall was a power beyond most, and few in this small place felt strong enough to break a lance with her.

Her voice was as the voice of a man, and there lay upon her upper lip a very handsome suggestion of a moustache!

She is an estimable woman, however, in many ways. Sound in all her relations—good wife, excellent friend of the poor, a philanthropist to her fingers' ends, but

the woman of all others hardest to endure—the woman who thinks *herself* right always, and *you* always wrong.

On medicines she is quite an authority! There is not a known disease in this wide and stricken world for which she could not at a second's notice produce a receipt. Medicine, indeed, is her *forte*. Considering the elaborate moustache that distinguishes her lip, one feels sorry that Providence had not at her conception altered her, and made her a man—a medical man!

The room in which she has received her unwelcome cousin is an index to herself. It is gaunt, bare, uncomfortable. The round mahogany table, brilliant with rubbing, and innocent of clothing, is holding itself very straight, as if with a rather disgusted appreciation of the volumes lying upon it in little sections, two here, three there, and so on, round its immense girth. The volumes are older than the table, and this is saying a good deal for them.

"I have been asking Maria about our neighbours," says Mrs. Chance, turning to her brother.

He laughs.

"What neighbours?" asks he.

"Why, all of them. But one special one—you have seen her."

"Mrs. Gaveston?" suggests the young man quickly.

"A happy guess!" Mrs. Chance nods her head several times. "I thought her the most charming woman I ever met. Didn't you?"

"That's a large order. I thought her delightful, certainly. But I only met her for a moment yesterday."

"To meet a woman is not to know her," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, breaking heavily into the discussion.

"You have the truth with you there," says Alec Grant. He laughs a little. "But certainly, Mrs. Gaveston struck me as charming—beyond words charming."

"So she strikes everybody at first sight!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss portentously. She draws herself up on her uncomfortable chair, and sips her tea slowly. It is bitter to her to hear this particular neighbour admired. Mrs. Gaveston, in her quick, impulsive, half-childish way, had given Mrs. Cutforth-Boss to understand, many and many a time, that she would not be managed by her! And Mrs. Cutforth-Boss had resented the silent

declaration. Mrs. Gaveston, who is only twenty-three, had treated the older woman with a sort of laughing contempt. She had shrugged aside all her attempts at advice and admonishment. Had pooh-hoohed, in her pretty saucy way, all Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's "My dear, in *your* place, I," etc., and had lifted her rounded shoulders against such speeches as, "When I was your age, I——" and "In my young days people never——"

Mrs. Gaveston's lovely gleaming eyes had been *too* gleaming on certain occasions, when Mrs. Cutforth-Boss had been bringing all her weight to bear upon her with a view to reducing her to reason, and clothing clubs, and penny readings, and so forth, and the latter had not forgotten or forgiven the amusement that lay behind that half-angry gleam.

"Women," says she now, "are the most deceitful creatures on earth."

"You *know* you don't expect me to believe that," says Alec, who is beginning to enjoy himself, in spite of his sister's covert admonitory frown. "You're a woman, aren't you?" There seem some grounds for this extraordinary question, when one looks at her upper lip.

"I hope so," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss solemnly. "At all events, I feel that I can never accuse myself of an action of which a woman should be ashamed."

"Ah, that!" says Grant. "I'd swear to that on the rack." Alec has now started, and his sister looks with terror at Maria, but to her astonishment Maria is smiling. A grim smile undoubtedly, but anything is better than her frown.

"There are exceptions to every rule," says she, with the graciousness that might belong to an educated elephant. "But I regret to say that Mrs. Gaveston is not all one could desire her. Not that I think her entirely to be blamed. At seventeen she was hurried into a marriage with a man double her age."

"Double? Is Mr. Gaveston double her age? Alec," Mrs. Chance turns to her brother, "What is twice seventeen?"

"Thirty-four."

"Oh! *too* great a disparity—and for a girl of seventeen——"

"As I say. A mere child. I make a point, you see,

of being quite fair to her, though I confess Cecilia Gaveston and I have few interests in common—a fact for which I am thankful to Heaven daily.”

“How could her people have allowed it?”

“When people are poor they make many allowances, and the Prendergasts had come down very much in the world. If *I* had been permitted a voice in the matter, the marriage should never have come off. But the mother was a very mercenary woman.”

“Her father?”

“He was dead. And the mother I believe hoped to gain comfort to herself through her daughter’s sacrifice. However, she only lived a month after the marriage, a most *just* act on the part of Providence. I always thought very poorly of Mrs. Prendergast—a designing person, of no merit whatever. I regret to say that I think her daughter is following in her footsteps—though I’m bound to confess she seems attached to her child.”

“Was that the little fellow I saw with her yesterday?”

“I suppose so. He must be five years old or six—let me see. No, five, Cecilia Prendergast married Mr. Gaveston six years ago last March.”

“Is he the only child?” Mrs. Chance is getting through her cross-examination in the most even way. Her cousin hardly knows that she is being questioned.

“Yes, more’s the pity. A large family might have sobered her, kept her down. *One* child is of little use; when the nature is frivolous it rises above *one* child. To see that young woman running about and playing bo-peep and other absurd games with her own child, would waken you at once to the fact that she wants chastening. Now if I had *my* way, she would have had——”

“The time honoured ten in five years,” says Alec, giving way to mirth.

“I do not desire the impossible, my dear Alec,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss severely, but not angrily. Mrs. Chance stares at her in astonishment. If *she* had ventured half that, the vengeance of Heaven would have descended upon her head. Has Alec then a hold upon her friendship? The widow feels gayer beneath this hope. And indeed Alec, as compared with his sister, has a good place in the stern Maria’s regard. Strange

as it may seem, this gaunt, hard woman, who has never known the meaning of love, and to whom passion would mean only immorality, still prefers men to women. "All I say is, that if that extremely flighty young woman were to have a nursery-full allotted to her, all might be—if not *well*, at least *better*!"

"Nature is such a stumbling block," says Mrs. Chance. "She so often mars one's plans." The widow smiles here in her pretty deprecating way. She certainly is very pretty. Her eyes are nearly as blue as her brother's, a little paler perhaps; and her lips are singularly young, considering she is thirty-one. Such rosy, smiling lips, yet at the back of their perfect smile, what is there? Ambition, secrecy, obstinacy, and a few other things.

"Nature cannot be blamed for the marring of Cecilia Gaveston, at all events," says Maria. "Her husband must be blamed for that. Anything like his silly conduct towards her could hardly be imagined. A man of his age would, one might imagine, be equal to the management of a mere girl like her—but no—he gives in to her in everything. He is positively her slave. I sometimes feel quite ashamed of him."

"I feel I could make excuses for him," says Alec thoughtfully.

"No doubt. One man will always uphold another. But I assure you, Bella"—in her excitement over the delinquencies of the Gavestons, Mrs. Cutforth-Boss grows almost friendly with Mrs. Chance—"that her extravagance is the talk of the county. Of course Peter Gaveston is very well off, but that is no excuse for the woman who seems to spend her time wasting his substance. The fact of the matter is, she is completely spoiled by him."

"I wish some one would spoil a few other women," says Grant, who, yesterday, had not been entirely impervious to the charms of Cecilia Gaveston. Providentially Maria does not hear him. She is now telling Mrs. Chance various other records of the pretty delinquent.

"But how do you mean spoiled?" asks the latter presently, in a little puzzled tone. Her curiosity has got the better of her judgment. And there had been a moment yesterday, when Mrs. Gaveston had been so pretty to

her, when she had wondered whether it would not be a bit of wisdom to throw off Maria, who was abominable, and throw in her chances with the lovely married girl who, after all, was far richer, and certainly more desirable than the dour cousin. "She seemed to me——"

"She can seem to you anything in the world you like," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a rather louder tone than usual. She is not accustomed to opposition of any kind, and resents it accordingly. "She does not suit me; she"—with withering meaning—"may very probably suit you."

"What *you* would object to, Maria, I should certainly not countenance," says the widow with fervour, who thinks it well to draw in her horns here. After all, Mrs. Gaveston seems a very quicksandy sort of person to depend upon. And there is time—time to *decide*. "I can only hope that Mrs. Gaveston will settle down in time, and be a good wife to the good man she has married."

This is all very well and highly moral, but unfortunately Alec has heard her, and now breaks into the conversation with most irreverent laughter.

"I only hope the good man will be a good husband to her," says he.

"There can be little doubt about that. Peter Gaveston is a most *excellent* person," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "I think it a pity, however, he has never been told of her early attachment to her cousin."

"Oh! you grow interesting," cries Mrs. Chance. "So there was a cousin—a lover—a previous affair?"

"I grieve to say so. Cecilia, three months before her marriage to Peter Gaveston—who is a most worthy person, if *weak*—had a very decided love affair with her cousin, Philip Stairs."

"Stairs!" Grant turns to her quickly. "Stairs of the 90th?"

"Yes," frigidly, "I believe he belonged to that regiment. At all events, she was decidedly *épris* with him before they hurried her into her marriage with Peter. I'm certain Peter never heard a word about it—her love affair with young Stairs, I mean—the mother was too clever for that; and as the young man was gone to India, and Cecilia hadn't a penny, the mother married her to Peter Gaveston."

"But Stairs," says Grant. "By Jove! how odd! Why, he was invalided home with me. Came in same boat—capital fellow too. Now that I think of it, I remember, too, his mentioning the fact that he knew some people here. But he never mentioned names. He wouldn't, you know!"

"I suppose you call that honour," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a withering tone. "I don't. I think if the whole thing had been made clear at once, it would have added to the comfort of everybody; specially of that unfortunate Peter Gaveston. And where is this young Romeo now, may I ask?"

"Not so very far," says Alec. "In the next county, staying with the Wilsons. He is to be here on the twelfth, at the McGregors'—cousins of his, I think."

"Yes, cousins! And so they are bringing that young man into close proximity with that flighty young woman again? They will have much to answer for!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a solemn tone.

"But such an old attachment as that, of course it will be at an end now," says Mrs. Chance. "Those childish affairs, they don't last—such *little* fires, you know."

"I *don't*," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, with decision. "And I know that six years ago Cecilia would have married her cousin, poor though they both were; and he—certainly he too would have married her. But the mother, as I tell you, put her foot down. By the way, Cecilia has a sister, who is coming to live with her. When last I saw her, just before Cecilia's marriage, she was a wretchedly behaved little creature—a mere unmannerly romp. I can only hope she has grown into something more respectable."

"When is she coming?"

"To-day, I believe. My brother is unfortunately slightly mixed up with her affairs."

"Stephen?" Mrs. Chance looks quickly up, and a faint colour tinges her cheek.

"Yes. On the mother's death, the child, Penelope Prendergast, was adopted by an aunt, who had married one of the Stauntons—who, you know, are related distantly to our family. This Mrs. Staunton sent the child to school in France or Belgium, I forget which, refusing to allow her to stay with her sister even during her

holidays, for which really I can hardly blame her, when one knows how frivolous Cecilia is. But the aunt died a month ago, and now Cecilia has claimed her."

"But about Stephen, where does he come in?" asks Mrs. Chance lightly. There is anxiety, however, in her tone.

"Oh! it's *most* annoying; and Stephen is really rather disgusted about it. But it seems this old Mrs. Staunton left all her money to Penelope—about three hundred a year—on condition that Stephen would consent to look after it for her, and see that she did not squander it, or make a bad marriage—at all events, until she is twenty-one. Mrs. Staunton had a curious fancy for Stephen, and sent for him on her death-bed, and, knowing he lived near the Gavestons, entreated him to look after the girl's money—to, in fact, be——"

"Her guardian?"

"Oh, not that! No, really. That would be *too* much," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, shrugging her lean shoulders. "To be guardian to a Prendergast! *No!* Only to see that she does not make ducks and drakes of the money. Bad enough for poor Stephen! But he hardly liked to refuse her on her dying bed. He is sometimes a little weak, you know."

"I wonder the aunt did not name Mr. Gaveston as guardian. Her brother-in-law would have been surely more suitable."

"I suppose she wanted to make a marriage between Stephen and his ward," says Grant lazily.

"Certainly not! What an absurd idea," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, with ill-suppressed indignation. "You little know Stephen, if you think he would marry anyone but a woman of distinction, of perfect manners and propriety. It would be a lasting cause of regret to me to see an undignified woman at the head of our house. And the Prendergasts are *all* undignified. I feel sure the future Lady Wortley will be all we can desire."

"This girl—is she as pretty as her sister?" asks Mrs. Chance. She has put down her cup and pushed it a little from her, though it is still half-full.

"One never can depend upon reports," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss indifferently, "but I have *heard* she is even better to look at."

"No such luck," says Grant. "Couldn't expect it. Too much for *one* family. Come to look at it, it wouldn't be *fair*!"

Mrs. Chance, for once, forgets to laugh. She is pretending to button her glove, but in reality she is thinking.

"I am thoroughly vexed that Stephen should be mixed up with these trying girls in *any* way," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "Of course, he is a model of common sense, but I fear there may be little hitches. You know, when dealing with undisciplined people one gets rubs now and again, and he is in honour bound to see how she spends her money."

"Poor girl!" says Alec. "I really think I'd rather not be left money, if somebody else was to be supervisor over it."

Mrs. Chance here turns more immediately to her brother. The usual pretty smile has returned to her lips.

"No, no, no!" cries she, archly; "what folly. And"—she pauses, and lets a little emphasis fall into her tone—"three hundred a year is a sum not to be despised in these bad days."

She rises, smiling still, and bids her cousin good-bye.

CHAPTER III.

"Her mouth was sweet as braket, or as methe,
Or hoard of apples, laid in hay or heath."

Down here, by the sea on this perfect day in May, all is beautiful! The little waves run in upon the beach as if in playful attack, and then run back again, laughing always.

The long, straight sweep of the coast leaves the water open, and the little rocks lying like dots upon the near shore shine like stars in the glistening daylight. Here and there upon these tiny islets the seagulls stand—a dream of white and grey—waiting to plunge into the calm waters for their daily bread. Now one rises, with beak

filled, and flies for a larger resting-ground, lest those of his fraternity nearest to him may rouse themselves to deprive him of his quarry.

The line of the horizon is very clear! Across it sails a ship, its white sails gleaming like silver in the soft haze of the burning light.

The sea is like glass, so smooth is its surface. Shadows are running over it—and streaks of light—ink-blue and darkest green—the most delicate tinges. And the little white waves, they are always here.

So many tiny bays breaking into the massive rocks! They make one wonder at their strength! All the cliffs are lined and warm with furze, and below, down there in that sheltered beach, with the wavelets running in and out, how lovely are the sea-weeds in the depths of the pools, and the sea-pansies, born of the sand.

There is something else on the small beach, too, even lovelier than the sea-weeds and the pansies! A young girl is moving lightly here and there. A slender creature, clad in a blouse of blue and white, and a skirt to match it—a skirt deliberately tucked up, as if to give free play to the pretty naked feet beneath it. A sailor hat covers the head that belongs to these naked feet, and under that hat is a face that might very properly be termed dangerous.

She has a little red bucket in her hand, such as children go armed with to the sea-shore, and from her constant peering into the pools that lie amongst the rocks, one may easily see that she is looking for the wild animals that one associates with sand and rocks and retiring tides.

"Here's another, Geoff!" cries she, with great excitement, plunging her hand into a pool near her, and dragging out a small, but much annoyed crab, who makes vicious dabs at her before she drops him into her bucket. Her voice rings sweet and clear, and reaches the ears of a young man, who is coming down from the heights above by a sloping, ragged pathway.

Across this little beach lies the nearest way to Wortley Towers, and the owner of that stately old place is in a hurry to get to it. He stops now, however.

The voice is clear to him, but the possessor of it, being round a corner, is not!

He amuses himself for a moment with the old legend of the mermaids, who are popularly supposed to frequent this particular part of the coast, and might have continued his fancies, but that all at once a little form comes into view. A pretty lad of five! With sleek brown head, and breeches well tucked-up, and his face rosy with his great exertions. A castle of sand is rising round him, and over the ramparts of this impregnable hold the owner, happening to look upwards, catches Sir Stephen's eye, and at once goes for him!

"Oh, here's Stephen. Stephen, come here! Nelly, here's Stephen!"

Nelly, the slender figure in the white and blue blouse, grows suddenly petrified.

"Here's Stephen!" Who's Stephen? Good gracious, what is to become of her? She casts a despairing glance at her undressed toes, and mentally gives herself up for lost. The thought of a coming someone, and that someone a "Stephen," is too much for her.

A glance behind shows her the entrance to a tiny cave. Who hesitates is lost! Into this she dashes with mad haste, but alas! it is *very* tiny, and any one passing by, with the very commonest eyesight, could certainly see her. In fact, this little hiding-place, to which she has flown for refuge, flatly refuses to conceal her.

Steps coming ever nearer, and the shrill, sweet prattle of the boy, warns her that concealment is no longer possible.

In a frenzied fashion she un-pins her skirt, drops into a sitting position on a small rock near her, about three inches from the sand, and, tucking her little naked feet well under her, waits the crack of doom!

"Here she is! Why did you run, Nell?" cries the boy.

Here Nell directs a murderous glance at him, which goes lightly over his closely shorn, and always adored, little head.

"Run?" says she, with a swift, indignant glance at the boy's companion. "I didn't run. I was tired—I——"

"I saw you," says the child; "I thought it was because you hadn't your sto——"

"Geoffrey!" cries Miss Prendergast.

A second's pause, and then:

"You haven't introduced me, Geoffrey," says Geoffrey's friend, smiling at the boy.

"What?" says Geoffrey, staring at him. He is not yet old enough to be a master of the ceremonies.

"I think you ought to tell your——?"

There is a question in his hesitation.

"She's my auntie," says Geoffrey, pointing a very sandy forefinger at the crushed Nell. "But she's very *little* to be an auntie, isn't she?"

The boy turns a thoughtful face up to Sir Stephen Wortley. He had once heard Mrs. Cutforth-Boss called aunt by a small nephew of her husband's, and probably his ideas of what an aunt should be had grown out of that.

"How can I tell?" says Sir Stephen, smiling. "Your auntie won't stand up, so I can't see how little she is."

He had spoken quite without *arrière pensée*, but all at once the brilliant, vivid blush that dyes the "auntie's" cheeks brings him up short. What has he said? Of course finding her with Geoffrey Gaveston, and knowing that Mrs. Gaveston's sister had come to her a week ago, he had at once guessed who Nell Prendergast was; the girl to whom his old friend and cousin had made him, in a sense, guardian. It had seemed to him that she too would understand who *he* was, so he had spoken lightly—with a smile. Now it occurs to him that she had resented the lightness of his manner. And why didn't she get up? He had put in that allusion to her not standing up merely in fun. Most girls would get up at an informal introduction like this—in the open air, and under the circumstances.

"Well, Geoffrey, won't you make us known to each other?" asks Sir Stephen, a little stiffly this time, but with a drawing of the boy to him, as if to neutralize his cold air.

"Don't you know her?" asks Geoffrey. "Why, she's Nell, and she came last week, and mammy's very glad, because she's her sister" He breaks off here as if thinking. "I haven't got a sister," says he. It is evident that he feels aggrieved.

"Your mammy's sister! That's all very well," says Sir Stephen. "You have introduced your auntie to *me*, which is, by the way, the wrong way round, but you have not told her who *I* am."

"You're Stephen," says the boy promptly. "He's Stephen, Nelly, and he lives in a big house over there," pointing indefinitely westward, "and there's lots of rabbits there."

"Not in the house," says Sir Stephen gravely. "You really ought to be more accurate, my dear Geoff. And as for your introduction, I am afraid it leaves a good deal to be desired. It is a little general, I am afraid." He glances down at Nell, who rigidly refuses to meet his eyes. "There must be more than one Stephen in the world."

He waits, as if expecting her to say something, but Miss Prendergast remains silent, and the boy, breaking into a fresh burst of conversation on the subject of another small crab he has just found, gives her pause.

Sir Stephen, bending over the child's new-found treasure, proceeds to examine it carefully through his eye-glass, telling himself the while that this girl, whose money affairs have been foisted upon him by her aunt, old Mrs. Staunton, is a silly fool of a little thing, with a pretty face, but without an ounce of brains.

What the deuce did that old woman put him in such a hole for? And why had he not had the common-sense to refuse the trust imposed upon him? If it had been a child even; but a young girl. There is no animal under heaven so sure to give trouble as a girl under twenty.

Meantime, the girl without "an ounce of brains," is gathering herself together. She has taken sufficient courage, during his apparently absorbed attention to Geoffrey's crab, to look up at him. And, all at once, it seems to her that he is the tallest man she has ever seen. Probably the delusion arises out of the fact that she is sitting on the ground, whilst he is standing. Literally, she is at his feet—a state of things that if it had occurred to her in its usual sense, would have enraged her. Providentially it hasn't!

She knows who he is now. The child had told her—Stephen. So *this* is the Sir Stephen Wortley, whom her aunt had decided should be guardian over her—not over *her* exactly, but over her money. It seems she cannot dare to spend a penny here or there without this man's permission. So *this* is her financial master!

An angry sense of resistance towards him springs to life within the girl's breast, and grows rapidly. The very fact that she cannot get up and confront him, exaggerates this feeling, and brings a little frown to her brow. To be obliged to sit here, with her bare, stockingless, feet tucked under her gown, places her at once at such an immense disadvantage. Oh! if she could only stand up and face him—— But how can she?

Why—*why* had she not seen him coming? Why could not that wretched boy have given her a word of warning? Why—*this* with a secret crunch of her small heel into the sand beneath it—had she ever so demeaned herself as to take off her stockings at all? *Now*, see what a nice fix she has got herself into, and all through her own folly.

One thing, at all events, remains, for which to be grateful. He cannot possibly know her *reason* for sitting here so immovably. Probably—happy thought!—he will put it down to insolence on the part of his ward. And he cannot know either that her shoes and stockings are lying hidden over there, behind that little rock. If only she can get rid of him, and *at once*. A quick thought comes to her. The best way to get rid of any one is just to make yourself as nasty to them as ever you can! Oh! for an opportunity! It is given her almost immediately.

"Look at him, Nell," cries the boy now, bringing his treasure to her for fresh inspection. "He's bigger than any of yours. He's a monster——"

"Of the deep," says Nell absently. Her gaze, in spite of her, turns to Sir Stephen, and—to her annoyance—meets his.

"I am afraid Geoffrey is hardly up to the mark," says he. "So I suppose I had better introduce myself, as we are to be such near neighbours. I——"

"Geoffrey has not been so stupid as you think," says she, interrupting him softly, but with meaning. "He has let me quite understand who you are. You——"

She pauses, and looks up at him, and all at once it comes to him that his first thought of her was but an error, and a most sorry one. In the clear eyes uplifted to his, there is meaning, rather distinct meaning now, and spirit—a good deal of spirit, as it seems to him, and

not of the mild order either. The owner or those limpid wells could never be "without an ounce of brains." But why then would she not speak at first?

"Yes?" questions he, smiling. He is looking down at her, studying her, admiring her. The little shapely head, with its soft wealth of chesnut hair, the curved, determined chin, the broad, sweet brow, over which the chesnut curls are straying, the mouth that remains a mystery! Is she tall, or short? *Very* small, it seems to him—but how can one judge, as she sits there, huddled up as it were. Why on earth can't she stand up, instead of sitting there in that extraordinarily uncomfortable position?—like a Chinese idol, by Jove! But *what* an idol!

Idol! The word seems to suit her somehow. *Whose* idol?

The very place in which she is sitting seems to suit her. The cave has a wide opening, but the rocks on each side close it in, and in the midst of the sand and shell she sits as though mistress of it. A nymph, she seems to him, a sea-nymph, a little mermaid. Perhaps that is why she has tucked her feet away so carefully. Perhaps, she has *no* feet!

"Yes?" says he again. Apparently the little mermaid is making up her mind about her answer.

"You are Sir Stephen Wortley," says she, all at once. "And it is you who are going to prevent me from spending my money!" Her tone is distinctly aggrieved.

CHAPTER IV.

"Fear is often concealed by a show of daring."

SIR STEPHEN laughs.

"Not *all* of it," says he.

"Still, if I wished to spend it all, I could not, without your permission."

"That is true, I'm afraid."

"You are virtually my guardian then?"

"That is also true—I'm *afraid*!"

He is still looking very much amused, and Miss Prendergast resents his mirth.

"You are wise," says she, her eyes defying his. "It is well to be prepared. Some day you will be *really* afraid." She gives him a little frown, and a defiant tilt of her chin, as she says this.

"Of course, if you are going to make it hard for me——"

"Not hard. But I shall not make it easy. I warn you that I detest control!"

Here she casts a swift glance at him from under the brim of her big hat. There is anxiety in this glance. Surely she has been nasty enough *now*! She has all *but* insulted him. Beyond doubt he is going away now—will be glad to go. Oh! certainly he *must* be going.

Apparently not! To her horror indeed, she sees him casting searching looks around, as if seeking a suitable rock on which to rest himself for the next week or so. What a hateful, *hateful* man! Why can't he go home, and let her put on her——?

He is now peering over her shoulder to a rock near her—*too* near indeed, because behind it—— Oh, "*that way madness lies!*"

She pulls herself together desperately, and wreathes her face in smiles. Those stockings once discovered, how is she ever to assert herself again?

"You look tired—desperately tired," says she. It is she who is feeling desperate, however. "I felt it the moment I saw you. *So* done up."

"Tired? Do I?" says Wortley, stopping short, and looking surprised. He hadn't known it until now. He had, in fact, felt quite fresh as he came down to this small beach. Miss Prendergast nods sympathetically.

"I saw it at the first glance," says she. She is talking rapidly. *Anything* to stop him from going to that rock, behind which—— "One always *knows*, doesn't one?" She smiles at him—a rather strained smile, however.

"Knows?"

"Oh, yes I could *see*. You looked so *full* of purpose as you came up—I knew at once that you were bent on business." She bends towards him now, and in her eagerness to get rid of him, very nearly lets one small bare toe come to light. Hurriedly she drags it back

into its hiding-place, growing crimson the while. "Go away," says she. "I mean"—confusedly—"go and do your business, whatever it is. Don't let me keep you."

"You're very good. But I'm afraid I'm not so busy a person as you imagine," says Wortley. "I've no very pressing business on hand just now, and you're not keeping me."

This last is a direct lie, though, perhaps, one might say he was unconscious of it.

"I've been pitching into a tenant over there," says he, pointing towards some fields far away up on the hills. "Lazy beggar, you know, lets the outhouses and fences go to destruction, and then expects me to do them up again. I hate rowing people, don't you?"

"Up to this," says Miss Prendergast thoughtfully, "it is I who have been always rowed."

Sir Stephen looks at her.

"I daresay!" says he. It is not the answer she had expected, and she turns a little from him. "Anyway," lazily, "I'm exhausted over my fight, and feel a little rest will do me good."

"Not a doubt of it," says she, forgetting her late swift touch of indignation, and growing suddenly almost enthusiastically sympathetic. "A rest is the very thing for you. A nice comfortable *quiet* rest, in your own easy-chair at home. Not," with a contemptuous wave of her hand at the rocks round her, "such a rest as *these* could afford you!" She bends towards him, her manner has grown quite brisk. She holds out to him a small, sun-burnt, but most delicately formed hand. "Good-bye!" cries she almost affectionately. "A rest—a rest is the very thing for you. *Good-bye!* Geoffrey and I"—oh! fatal speech—"will have to go home shortly too."

"At that rate, I may as well wait for you," says Wortley pleasantly, all unconscious of the tragic element that is warming the air around them. "Your way is mine, you know. The Towers is only a mile from your sister's place. If you will allow me, I'll stay with you until his Royal Highness over there," pointing to Geoffrey, "is ready to start. There are, I am afraid," with a steady look at her, "a few vexed questions between us that we might smooth away, if we went into them a little."

The steadiness of his gaze alarms her. There is *one* vexed question certainly. How on earth is she to get back her shoes and stockings, and cover her feet with them without his knowledge? Does he know? Does he mean anything? Or is he only alluding to his odious guardianship? Poor Nell on her stool of repentance wriggles a little. The wriggle very nearly brings her right foot out into the broad glare of the wicked sunshine. She drags it back suddenly, and a warm flush dyes her face.

"You look very uncomfortable," says Wortley. "Can't I find you a better place to sit in than that you have chosen?"

"No. No, thank you," hastily, "I'm all right. I like sitting here."

"You'll get cramped if you sit there much longer; I," his tone is now quite concerned, "I'd strongly advise you to get up and walk about for a bit. These sands are often sure forerunners of a very serious cold. Come," holding out his hand to her, "let me help you up, and let us go for a brisk stroll along this little beach until you must go home."

"No. *Really*," she has shrunk back from his hand as though affrighted by it, "I'd rather *not* walk. I should indeed. I—I'm awfully happy here. I——"

"As you will, of course," says he, with a slight shrug. He looks round him, giving again some thought to the little rocks near, as if seeking one on which to sit and work out those vexed questions, those troublesome problems he had suggested to her.

One at last takes his fancy. It is the one nearest to her. It is indeed but a step or two away from her, and undoubtedly it looks uncomfortable; it rises as high as an ordinary table, but, unlike the kind of table from which we all like to swing our legs, it is not broad at the top, but somewhat peaked. Now people seldom like to sit on a peak. He goes towards it, however. As I have said, it is *very* near to her.

"Stop!" cries Miss Prendergast. Her voice rings through the little cave. What is there in it? He hardly knows, but he turns at the sound of it, and looks at her. "Don't sit there," says she. "I really *wouldn't* if I were you. Come and sit here," she pulls her skirts

frantically aside, taking care always to conceal her feet. "Here. It will be *much* more comfortable here!"

It is certainly an invitation; Wortley looks at her! There is no mistake about it, however. She is patting the two or three inches of stone laid bare by her hurried edging along the small rock, as though most flatteringly desirous of having his company on it. But the pale determined face, and the coldness of the hazel eyes fixed on him with what he can hardly refuse to believe is malignity in their gaze, makes him hesitate.

What on earth does she want? What is the matter with her? Is she eccentric? One never likes to say "mad" at first.

"I'm afraid if I sat there, you would be without a seat," says he courteously, with a smile, but a puzzled one. As he says it he walks quickly (it seems a moment for haste!) to the rock he had before signified as a momentary resting-place. Here he thought he would sit, and study her, and if—More people are insane than people dream of—

As he moves Nell rises, and grows suddenly frenzied. Great Heavens! behind that particular rock lie her shoes, her *stockings*. One never knows why, but it is a positive fact that one's shoes are always innocent when compared with one's stockings.

Once he gets to that rock, all will be over. He will see her shoes and stockings lying behind it and will know that she—

"Don't go there!" cries she frantically. "Don't! don't."

He is *at* the rock now, but he turns. Good Heavens, *is* she mad? that pretty creature, with those earnest eyes! The thought is a pain to him, and he turns from it, to look over the rock on which he would have seated himself to see—

Two small high-heeled shoes, and two silk stockings, and two pale blue silken garters lying all together, in the most delicate confusion.

CHAPTER V.

"When anger rises, think of the consequences."

THERE is a long pause!

Sir Stephen stands conscience-stricken. All at once he understands why she was so strange in her manner, so almost discourteous. This is why she would not stand up! Why the deuce hadn't he done as she desired him to do at first—why hadn't he gone away?

An imbecile determination to see, to know nothing, takes him. He turns to her his face, full of a most careful innocence that would not have imposed upon a baby. This guileless expression maddens Miss Prendergast—it seems indeed to make her feet ten times more devoid of shoes and stockings on the spot. She is very young, and when one is very young, one is often so angry.

"After all I don't think this rock would make a comfortable seat either," says Sir Stephen, turning his back upon the pretty shoes, and trying to look as if he had never seen a garter in his life. It is very clumsily done, it must be confessed. He comes forward and she can see that his face is a little red; but to her indignation, it becomes apparent that his redness is born of a strong determination not to laugh. He looks grave to the verge of tears, but for all that, she is quite aware that he is inwardly dying with laughter. He has overdone the gravity a little. "Perhaps——" continues he.

Miss Prendergast interrupts him somewhat unexpectedly. With an almost imperceptible gesture of her slight arm, she puts him to one side as it were, and leaning forward calls to the little Geoffrey, still busy with his shells and tiny crabs.

"Come here, Geoffrey! Come at once." There is a subdued ring in her voice, that brings Wortley's eyes to her face. "*Hurry!* you mammy will be unhappy about you, if we don't get home soon. Bring me my shoes and stockings; you will find them behind that little rock over there!"

It is certainly, if not a victory, a most gallant retreat!

Sir Stephen, carrying with him a flashing sting from the brilliant hazel eyes, goes quickly to the boy, who is coming with a rush to his auntie (an auntie who is after all only a playfellow), and catching him by the arms, stops him.

"Let me go," says the boy. "Nell wants her stockings, and I want to go home, I'm hungry."

"So you ought to be at this dissipated hour," says Sir Stephen. He swings him lightly on to his shoulders. "Come, let us go and look for mussels wherewith to assuage the cravings of our inner man!"

"But Nell——?"

"Your auntie requires five minutes or so in which to make up her mind as to whether she will come home with us."

"But she said——"

"I don't believe a word of it," says Sir Stephen gaily.

He carries off the boy, and Nell, left alone in her cave, makes a rueful dash for the unfriendly rock that had failed to help her in her emergency, and, sitting down behind it, restores her charming little feet to that state required of them in Society.

Presently, emerging once more into the more open daylight, she calls to the boy.

"I am ready now, Geoffrey. Come!"

Not a word, not a look, is vouchsafed to Geoffrey's companion.

"Ah! that's good news," says that imperturbable person. "Geoffrey has confided to me that he is hungry, Miss Prendergast, and though I have worked wonders with mussels, he doesn't seem to find them satisfactory. I," it is a direct question, "I may walk home with you?"

"You have said your way is mine," returns she, courteously, but icily.

In silence they leave the tiny beach and get to the road, the boy running on before them in search of flowers and butterflies. This sweet May-day is full of both; warm as the heart of summer, it has enticed abroad all sorts of gleaming insects, and now here, now there, even the delicate butterfly, summer's own delight, is spreading soft wings from petal to petal. A splendid "Admiral" over there has caught Geoffrey's eye, and away he goes after it, hat in hand.

One steps a little low down here, right into the valley.

The sea is lying behind. Above, the sky is burning with a glorious blue heat. But here there is shelter, if only for a minute or so.

"Deep in the glen's bosom
Summer slept in the fire
Of the odorous gorse-blossom
And the hot scent of the briar.

* * * *

"A ribald cuckoo clamoured,
And out of the copse, the stroke
Of the iron axe that hammered
The iron heart of the oak."

They can hear it, these two, as they go on. Chop-chop-chop. It seems to cut not only into the trees on their right hand, but into the silence that is holding them as in a vice.

At last Wortley breaks it.

"It wasn't my fault," says he. His tone is quite as grave as ever, but, as before, it seems to her that a note of suppressed amusement runs through it.

"Fault?" There is open and not altogether pleasant question in her tone.

"That I——"

"That you——" She stops short, and goes on again. "I can't see where the word *fault* comes in."

"Still, it seemed to me——"

"I don't know what it seemed to you. You are quite a stranger to me. For my own part," vigorously, "I don't care a *fig* about your finding them."

"Finding them?"

"Oh, yes. *Finding them*. I suppose," with another angry flash from her beautiful eyes, "a person can take off their shoes and stockings if they *like*, without being brought to book by," with quite magnificent scorn here, "their guardian."

A moment or two, and then:

"Undoubtedly." Another moment or two, and then—"By the bye, were *yours* off?"

This is too much! Miss Prendergast stops short upon the dusty road.

"To be a hypocrite, is to be *contemptible*!" says she; she draws her breath sharply.

"That is beyond dispute," says Wortley. "Hypocrites are not only immoral, but a bore. You have some one in your mind?"

"Yes, *you!*" says the girl straightly.

Sir Stephen looks at her. Her eyes are flashing, her lips a little parted—such lips, such eyes—both beautiful! What is she, child or woman? Nay, child,

"A wild-eyed child, strong-hearted."

"But I assure you I'm not one," says he.

"Not even when, a moment ago, you said you were sorry you were in fault about—about——"

"Well—about?"

"Finding my shoes!"

"After all, I don't think I was alluding to your shoes when I said that," says Sir Stephen.

"What *did* you mean then?"

"That it was not *my* fault that I had been, in a way, appointed your guardian!"

"Oh, *that*," says Nell. She tightens her teeth upon the under lip, as if to keep herself in order. He has had the best of her here certainly. He has indeed discomfited her "these two times." *Her* mind had been full of the luckless shoes and stockings, and he knew that, and traded on it to bring her to confusion over the guardianship.

How contemptible! How mean! Well—he *shall* pay for it!

Her small mutinous mouth grows suddenly firm. Her eyes cling to the ground; not a word but "Yes" and "No" escapes her during the long walk that brings them from that beach to the entrance gate of Gaveston Park. She has been thinking—thinking all the way, and now evidently her thoughts have reached maturity, because suddenly her whole manner changes.

Sir Stephen has opened the gate, and she and little Geoffrey stand inside it.

"Good-bye," says Wortley, holding out his hand, but hardly expecting her to accept it. To his everlasting surprise, however, she slips her slender fingers into his. He holds them in a bare clasp, expecting them to be indignantly withdrawn after the barest pressure, but to

his surprise the soft little palm lies in his most willingly.

"I am afraid I have been very cross," says the softest voice in the world.

Is it *her* voice? Wortley glances at her; as he does so, it is beyond dispute that his fingers tighten over hers.

"It is I who——" begins he, but she will not listen to him.

"No, no, no," cries she, laughing—such a pretty laugh! She gives a little upward glance at him. "Good-bye," says she. Her lovely eyes are resting upon his; her lips widen into a perfect smile. He does not answer. Perhaps this great want of courtesy on his part pleases her, because she smiles again, and again murmurs to him "Good-bye," softly and slowly.

As softly and slowly she withdraws her hand from his, and, calling Geoffrey to her, turns away.

After a step or two, however, she looks back.

Wortley is still standing at the big iron gate, watching her. Something in the intentness of his gaze satisfies her.

She laughs aloud as she runs down the avenue to the house, the boy racing beside her.

"Now who'll be first?" cries she.

Panting and laughing, she draws up at the stone steps of the hall door, and wheeling round, throws up her hands at Geoffrey.

"First, first! I told you I'd beat you," cries she.

"Race me again," cries the child.

"No, to-morrow if you like. But I warn you I shall win."

She steps lightly into the dim, beautiful old hall, and up the broad, oaken staircase. Half way she stops as though thinking.

"Yes, I shall win!" says she softly.

She is not thinking of Geoffrey, however.

CHAPTER VI.

"Surely Nature must have meant you
For a syren when she sent you
That sweet voice and glittering hair,
—Was it touch of human passion
Made yon woman in a fashion—
Beauty Clare?"

"I've met my Bogie man," cries Nell, rushing into the dainty boudoir, that the master of Gaveston Park has arranged with such care and love for the beautiful girl he had married six years ago. At this moment the owner of it is looking if possible even more delightful than usual.

She is lying in a lounging chair, with her hands clasped lazily behind her charming head, and her feet stretched lazily out before her. Her pose is grace itself. The indolent, lovely grace of a kitten.

Her soft, hazel eyes, so like yet so unlike her sister's, have a lazy look too, as if she were but half awake, and her small parted lips wear the smile of a child—a child who seldom thinks—who lives, and is happy and content—and that is all. Such lovely lips, so red, so ripe, and always a little parted, showing the small pearls within. She looks even younger than Nell—yet she is *almost* twenty-four, and Nell almost eighteen.

As her sister comes in Mrs. Gaveston (she has evidently been doing nothing) brings her arms from behind her head, and lets them fall into her lap with an exquisite abandon. Her small hands, fragile and delicately white, with a faint tinge of pink running through them upwards to the pretty nails, are covered with rings; a tiny jewelled dagger is pushed through the coils of her bright chesnut hair, that she wears in a huge knot low down upon her neck. She is dressed in a tea-gown, loose apparently, yet so arranged as to show each line of her perfect figure. It is made of white silk, rich and velvety, and a few little flounces of priceless lace have been inserted by an artistic hand into the front of it. It is a gown an abnormally rich woman might

have worn in her own house when giving a reception, but hardly the gown that the wife of a country gentleman of ordinary means would wear for her own delectation. From beneath it the dainty laces of her petticoat may be seen, and one small foot clad in a black-silk, open-worked stocking, and a Louis Quinze shoe.

Nature is not always kind, and amuses herself sometimes! She gave Cecilia Gaveston the spirit of extravagance, and no doubt watched her vagaries with delight. Cecilia positively does not know the meaning of the value of money. A child when married to Peter Gaveston, a child she has remained, encouraged certainly by that most foolish man. At thirty-four, he had for the first time in his life fallen madly in love, and when her people induced her to marry him, he had told himself that nothing from his heart's blood downwards was too good for her.

To ask, with the adored child he had married, was to have. Five thousand a year is not a large income, but Mrs. Gaveston's ponies, Mrs. Gaveston's hunter, Mrs. Gaveston's carriage horses became at once the talk of the county. Mrs. Gaveston's gowns were especially discussed by the women folk.

Mrs. Gaveston herself, however, had been very kindly treated by her neighbours when she came to her new home. She was so pretty, so young—a little inconsequent perhaps, and undoubtedly extravagant, but all that would wear off. And she seemed so gentle, so tender-hearted . . . once her child was born.

The coming of the child had been quite an event. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss was perhaps the only person in the neighbourhood who had not been sympathetic over that "sweet young thing." But then Cecilia had shown herself restive under Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's advices concerning the coming event.

When the child was born—and a boy too—most people were honestly pleased, and Peter Gaveston, holding his wife and son in one embrace, told himself Heaven had been too good to him.

Cecilia had accepted the child as a toy. She played with it, loved it. . . . But nothing in her married life seemed to have roused her to higher thoughts. She never seemed to grow older. At times a little cloud

would drop into her eyes, but even she herself hardly knew what it meant. One, looking at her then, would say she was a woman disappointed—a woman to whom life was so far a failure, that she had missed the real *good*—the heart and centre of it all; but the little cloud would disappear so swiftly, and so swiftly would the pretty laugh come back again, that he would deem himself a fool for so saying.

Her love for the child was very strong. It was the strongest feeling she had ever known, but all her ways with it were light and happy, he was her last new gift at first . . . and after that a treasured toy. He was certainly more of an amusement to her than anything else. A delicious doll that could speak and laugh, and hear, and answer her back again.

Her married life had run in such smooth lines, that she had had no cause to repent the step she was compelled to take. That first young grief—young indeed, yet sharp enough to numb her, coming in the first spring of her youth to womanhood, has been long since put away. Locked aside in a cupboard of her heart, and fastened with an iron key. If unhappily her heart had been locked away with it, it was done unconsciously, and she had never missed it since. The tender girl of seventeen, with her soul just wakening to the one great sweetness of life, is now fast developing into the woman of fashion, quite good, quite pure, and wholly heartless.

She had not understood the shock that had been given her—the wrench—the tear. Philip, her friend, her—yes—her *friend*—there was no other name for him, for no words had been spoken, there were no kisses to be remembered, save *one*! Philip was gone. He had sailed for India almost at a moment's notice, and her mother, seeing Mr. Gaveston's evident admiration for her, had taken her suddenly away to visit some people in Devonshire, leaving no address behind. Even "a moment's notice" might give a lover time to say a fatal word or two, and that was to be prevented at all risks.

Philip Stairs sailed for India without seeing his little love again; but he sailed in the full hope that she understood and would wait for him, and that when he came back again, it would be to take her out to India with him.

Six months afterwards he heard of her marriage to Mr. Gaveston!

He had written several letters after his arrival at Calcutta, but it is the simplest thing in the world to put a letter into the fire, as Cecilia's mother has discovered, and Cecilia never knew that he had written. Such letters as they were too! Mrs. Prendergast must have had a heart of iron to burn them. They breathed all the love, the fire, the devotion that unhappily he had not given voice to before leaving. But he had been so happy with his pretty love—and there seemed to be so much time, and he was so sure that she knew—understood—and he was so young himself, that he had kept silence until alas! the words "too late" were written.

He had certainly endured more than Cecilia. She had felt a little benumbed at first, but though her mother had shown him up in the coldest light, never angered. Only the numbness had grown and increased, until at last she found herself married to Peter Gaveston—and later, the mother of his child—and always the sole aim and centre of his existence.

As for Gaveston he had heard from Cecilia's mother (she was a careful woman) of what she called "Cissy's childish flirtation with Phil Stairs." So the mother had represented the poor girl's growing passion for her childhood's friend. And, indeed, Phil had sailed for India before she spoke to Gaveston of it at all, and then it was in the airiest fashion, laughing all the time.

It was quite a little family joke, she said. She treated it as a joke with Cecilia too, and hinted at Phil's marriage with his colonel's daughter in India. She laughed a great deal at this time, she seemed to Cecilia to be always laughing, and in the end: when no letters came, the girl began to believe in a colonel's daughter, or at all events in *somebody's* daughter.

Phil was gone anyway, and he had not written, and he had said nothing before going. Perhaps there was nothing to be said . . . she had been mistaken, that was all—such a foolish mistake! And Mr. Gaveston was very kind—so kind—and Mama wished it . . . and—it was thus the matter was arranged.

Not a soul had hinted a word about it to Peter Gaveston. Indeed, as I have explained, there was very little

to be hinted. It had been so *slight*! Just the two young people together at tennis parties, and dances, and so inseparable. Nothing more than that. Yet certainly everyone had thought that "something would come of it." That was how they put it, as though the word marriage was improper so early in the day. Another thing! everyone would have been slow to speak to Gaveston about a matter that so closely concerned him, for though a kindly gentleman, and most tender-hearted, still there was something about him that warned people not to come too near. He was indeed difficult of approach—a shy man, but a proud—at heart.

And of course as years went on, most people forgot all about that old tale. It sank to the level of a lie. It was indeed hardly remembered until now—now, when the return of Philip Stairs brought it all back again—to a few. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss was at the head of these few!

* * * * *

"What? You've met Sir Stephen *already*?" Mrs. Gaveston grows interested—she leans forward, her bright eyes sparkling. "How *clever* of you. I always dread the *first* step in the minuet, don't you? Well—isn't he charming? Quite too charming? What did you think of him, eh?"

She speaks quickly—vivaciously—every gesture is wonderfully young.

"He's not so bad as he might be, if it comes to that," says Miss Prendergast, with a little contemptuous sniff. "He didn't swallow me up *quite*! but he thinks a lot of himself in my opinion; and I hate people who smile in the wrong place."

"In the wrong place?" puzzled. "The *wrong* side of his mouth do you mean?" she laughs.

"Oh no!" with an emphatic shake of her small head. "*Not yet!*" this sounds ominous.

"Good Heavens! My dearest Nell. How tragic! What has happened between you and your respected guardian? When *did* the poor man smile?"

"When he found I had been entertaining him for half an hour without my shoes and stockings."

Mrs. Gaveston leans back in her cushions and gives way to a dainty little shout of laughter.

"Ah! you darling girl! I *knew* you would be a comfort—a boon and a blessing to me, like the Waverley pens. Go on! Tell me all about it . . . without," chuckling sweetly again, "your shoes and stockings! How compromising! Oh! you'll *have* to marry him. You will indeed."

"Marry him! I like that!" says Nell indignantly. "Disagreeable beast!"

"Don't swear! Come, tell me all about it."

Nell murmurs something about being down on the beach with Geoffrey, catching crabs in rocky pools, and of the sudden advent of the stranger, and her sudden little flop upon the ground, her inability to get up again, and *The Discovery* in very big letters, and so on.

"He either knew all the time," finishes Nell angrily who has quite warmed to the work of relation, "which would make him out a cad——"

"He isn't *that* certainly," interrupts her sister.

"Or else he *didn't* know, which means that he is an advanced idiot."

"And certainly he isn't *that*—though anyone with a sister like Mrs. Cutforth-Boss—(you have yet to meet *her*)—might reasonably be forgiven for being one. No. I assure you, Nellie, Sir Stephen is one of the most delightful people round us. I agree even with Peter about that." She makes this allusion to her husband in the airiest way. Not at all unkindly, but so *very* indifferently. "Sir Stephen is quite a favourite with us both."

"Twice blessed!"

"Now, really you must *try* to like him. It will be to your good you know. He will have so much to do with your affairs. The managing of your allowance, and I'm *afraid* he's very conscientious, so you will have to be very pretty to him. But he's delightful—the *dearest* manners; and always so nice to me!"

"Oh! if *that's* all. Who *wouldn't* be that?"

"Wouldn't be what?"

They both turn and look towards the door and with very ready smiles of welcome too.

The master of the house has just come in.

CHAPTER VII.

"This life—one was thinking to-day,
In the midst of a medley of fancies—
'Tis a game, and the board where we play
Green earth with her poppies and pansies.
Let *manque* be faded romances,
Be *passee* remorse and regret;
Hearts dance with the wheel as it dances—
The wheel of Dame Fortune's roulette."

"CECILIA has just told me, as a matter of surprise," says Nell, "that Sir Stephen Wortley is always very nice to her."

"Nice to Cecilia?" Mr. Gaveston smiles slowly—he is a very slow man about most things—and looks at his wife.

"Why not?" says he.

"Just what *I* say," cries Nell, whose real name is Penelope. "When one is a beauty, one——"

"Nonsense!" interrupts Cecilia, with an affectation of anger, but blushing delightfully for all that. It is not often one worries a compliment out of one's *sister*. "I won't hear of that. That's folly! A beauty indeed!"

"How is it, Peter?" demands Nell, addressing her brother-in-law with an air that might almost be called a betting one.

"I think we'll let it stand at that," says Mr. Gaveston with a grave smile directed at his wife.

"Oh! you're both in a conspiracy! And as for you, Peter," she looks at him, and makes a charming little grimace, "you're a fool!"

"To think you a beauty?" Peter Gaveston's usually quiet air here lifts a little. There is positive adoration in the look he gives her.

"Pouf! We won't go into it," says she. "What we were really talking about was Sir Stephen Wortley."

"Yes, Sir Stephen," says Nell. "A bore *I* call him, but Cecilia says otherwise. She says he is always all he ought to be, and very nice—to *her*! In my opinion——" Here she catches Gaveston by his coat, and draws him to

her. "Come close to me, that I may whisper to you. It is my belief that your Cissy is—a—*big flirt!*"

At this they all laugh immoderately, as though it were the finest joke in the world, as indeed it is—if *one could not see the end of it!*

"Isn't she funny?" says Cecilia, laughing gaily. "How lovely it is to have her with me at last, now that that dreadful old woman is dead." She puts out one of her delicately white and jewelled hands, and catching Nell's skirts, drags her down on to a milking-stool beside her. "I always knew I wanted a companion."

Gaveston here lifts his head, and lets his eyes rest upon his beautiful wife. Any emotion in the world might be expected of a husband under this remark—which, it must be thoroughly understood—was *unmeant*. There might be disappointment, resentment, anger or some other even stronger feeling; but there was nothing of this in Peter Gaveston's gaze. Six years had taught him a good deal. There was only the pleasantest reproach in his gaze, and that really meant nothing. He had had from the beginning a certain amount of friendliness and sweetness from her. He was grateful for so much in the beginning, and she had been so altogether a reflex of that beginning until now, that he had fallen into a fool's paradise, and believed that all she had to give was his—and so he lived content.

"Don't I come in anywhere?" asks he, but with the happily reproachful air of a man who believes in no misfortune so far as the love of he and his wife are concerned.

"Oh! you!" says Cecilia. "You are always there, of course." She gives him the sweetest little glance. "But consider, Peter! You hunt all the Winter, and you farm all the Spring, and you worry your poor tenants all the Summer, and you begin your hunting again in the Autumn; and after all where do *I* come in? What do *I* do?"

There is a jest only in her tone. But the jest seems to at once hurt and delight him. He turns to her quickly. *Has she missed him now and then?*

"Have you been lonely, then? Have I failed so far?"

"Oh, *you!*" Mrs. Gaveston leans back in her lounging chair, and holds out a charming hand to him. She has

crossed one knee over the other, and the exquisite lace frillings of her petticoat come into view. "You are an *angel*!"

At this they all laugh again.

"A substantial one!" says Nell, and, indeed, Gaveston is a man of grand proportions. Cecilia is holding out her hand to him. Such a little hand! He takes it, and bending over it, presses a most honestly fond kiss upon it.

She seems like a mere child next to *him*. Gaveston is six feet one, if an inch, and a well-set-up man besides. He has a noble chest, broad and strong, and a head most handsomely set upon his shoulders. He is certainly not a "beauty man," so far as features are concerned, but there is more beauty in the open glance of his kindly eye, and in the delicate strength of his well-bred mouth, than most so-called handsome men could lay claim to. He looks quite his forty years, but not a day more, and a man of forty is still on the right side of life. There is, however, something a little incongruous in his large, massive, thoughtful style and the dainty, vague, childish loveliness of the wife he has chosen.

They are still laughing, when the door is pushed open, evidently by a foot, and the child enters, his hands and arms full of shells, which he deposits, without a second's notice, upon his mother's silken lap.

"Oh! Geoff!" cries Nell, rushing to the rescue. The soft priceless, little lace flounces seem sinking beneath their burden.

"I say, Geoffrey, you *might* think of your mammy," says his father, in tones of remonstrance.

Nell glances hastily at her sister, who is half a stranger to her as yet, expecting a dainty expression of anger, of horror.

Not at all! Mrs. Gaveston puts up her pretty hands, and drags her boy's head down to her own, and kisses him proudly.

"Why, that is just what he has been doing," cries she gaily. "Thinking of his mammy. See all these lovely shells he has brought me. And all so *clean* too."

She looks at the child with question in her eyes.

"I washed 'em," says Geoffrey smiling, laying his small hands upon her shoulders, and shaking her slender figure

to and fro, whilst she smiles back at him. "They were sandy all over, but I scrubbed them all out, and polished them with a bit of flannel that Mary gave me."

"There!" says Mrs. Gaveston triumphantly. She is looking at the child, and now her lips widen into a laugh. She lays her own bejewelled fingers upon the boy's shoulders in turn, and together they rock to and fro, until at last, with gazing in each other's eyes, they both burst out laughing. It is the prettiest sight. The child laughing into his mother's eyes, and the mother, who looks herself a child, laughing back at him. "Isn't he sweet?" cries she suddenly to Nell, looking over the boy's shoulder. "Isn't he a precious thing? Fancy his washing them, and *polishing* them before he brought them to me. Oh! Geoffrey!" giving him a vigorous little push, "you're a small snake. You are gliding, and gliding, and gliding into my heart, coil by coil, until at last there will be only room for you."

"Bad law for the rest of us," says Gaveston, catching his little son, and flinging him up to his shoulder.

"He's the image of me, Nell, isn't he?" asks Mrs. Gaveston lazily.

"Yes; but he's got his father's eyes."

"Do you think so? Oh, *no*. Surely *not*, Peter?"

Mr. Gaveston, who is playing with the boy, answers leisurely:

"Your eyes, we'll hope. You *are* a beauty, Geoff. Eh?"

"Yes, he's like me," says the pretty woman conclusively.

"I want to be like pappy," says the boy suddenly.

"I want to be a man. I will *not* be a woman."

"Well, you shan't," says his father consolingly.

"But what have *I* done to you?" asks his mother, with exaggerated reproach.

"Nothing! Only I want to have a red coat, and a hunting horse like pappy."

"Oh, if *that's* all," says Cecilia laughing.

"'Tisn't much of an ambition," says Gaveston.

"To be like you? Oh, I think it is," says his wife charmingly. "Geoffrey," quickly, "what are you doing? Trying to garotte your father?"

Indeed, it looks like it. The boy has now got fairly on to his father's back, and has both his sturdy young legs

crossed round his throat. His arms follow his legs and the little lips are pressed to Gaveston's ears.

"What is it now? Want *me* to be a hunting horse? Well, here goes?"

Gaveston walks to the door and from thence throws back a glance at the two women.

"If I don't turn up again, you will know what has happened to me," says he with a sort of slow humour.

Mrs. Gaveston flings herself back in her chair with a sharp sigh. Nell uncomfortably asks herself—Is it of relief?

"I always hate people to say queer things like that?" says she. "I'm shamefully superstitious, I know that. But really, to say even in jest, that one might never turn up again——"

"Don't be in the least uneasy—at all events on *this* occasion," says Mrs. Gaveston, with an idly amused air. "Peter is always *sure* to turn up again, whoever else may not."

Something in her air, her manner, induces Nell to go a little farther into the matter.

"I do like Peter," says she, heartily. "I always thought I shouldn't, you know. His being so much older than you are——"

"Oh, he's a dear. A perfect dear," says Mrs. Gaveston enthusiastically; "you know I *said* he was an angel a while ago. And I meant it, I did indeed. Of course one could wish him a little—well—*prettier*," laughing, "and with a little more hair on his blessed head—but really beyond that there is nothing to complain of."

This very negative praise makes Nell wonder. Nell! who has gone down before Peter's charm of manner and kindly courtesy, and who has already the germs of a most faithful affection for him in her somewhat flighty breast. Why does Cissy talk of him like that? Dear good old Peter. Do all wives talk of their husbands so? No—No—of course not. And of course Cissy meant nothing. It is only that she is a spoiled child, too lovely, and too much beloved.

The lovely Cissy is looking at her now, with an amused smile upon her lips.

"Well! What is it?" asks she, "your mind is full of someone."

"Of *you*, then—if I must tell the paltry truth. That gown, Cis. It is a triumph."

"So it ought to be," says Mrs. Gaveston with a shrug. "Such a sum as she has charged for it. Fancy a little thing like this," lifting a bit of her skirt, "costing twenty-two guineas!"

Miss Prendergast examines her carefully from head to heel.

"Really, I think it's cheap," says she. The family failing of extravagance has evidently been inherited by her too.

"Oh, I daresay! But Peter won't look at it as you do. Lately he's been growing *so* particular. And of course, when I ordered this gown, I *never* thought it would come to so much."

"Yes, and he——"

"He. I haven't told him. He was a little annoyed over my last bill. Not *annoyed*, you know. He is always so kind, so *good*, but he said he thought I was old enough to learn the value of money. And really, I *am*." She pauses and casts a half-dignified, half-troubled glance at Nell. "I wish *I wasn't*," says she. "I wish I was only three years old again: then no one could say a word to me."

"Then you would not have the knowledge to dress expensively," says Nell laughing. "You couldn't have designed pictures like *that*," pointing to the gown in question. "You *did* design it?"

"Well, partly. I saw a gown like it at Lady Overton's one day, and I idealized it, and *here* is the result. But honestly, Nell, this gown disturbs me; you see my allowance——"

"What is it?"

"Two hundred a year. I really think he might make it two hundred and fifty, don't you?"

"Ask him."

"I couldn't! He has said so much about my extravagance already. And really perhaps I *am* bad in little ways like that. Anyway, I can't ask him *now*. It is only three months ago since he paid a bill for me."

"A big one?"

"Three hundred pounds. It really ought to have been *five*," says Mrs. Gaveston, "but—it is such a comfort to

have some one to talk to, Nell. I hadn't the courage to tell him *all*. He is so grave and so big, and so solemn; isn't he *now*?"

"Do you know I think *I* could tell him," says Nell.

"Well, *I* couldn't. And you don't know him. I think he would be very angry."

"If you are only *thinking* that, after being married to him for six years, there can't be much in it. But don't worry yourself, Cissy. You know I've got a lot of money. *Heaps!*" spreading out her hands, "and I'll give you some of it."

"If," says Cecilia, laughing, "your guardian lets you."

"Oh! as for *that*," she makes a saucy *moue*, "you'll see for yourself presently about that. I'm not a child, to be made go here and there."

Mrs. Gaveston's lips widen into a more amused smile.

"You look like it, anyway," says she.

"Oh, *well!*" It is plain that Nell is a little annoyed. "What is it you want then? Two hundred pounds?"

"Nonsense. As if I wanted *you* to pay my bills. Tut, you silly thing. There! go and play with Geoffrey, that's your proper *rôle*. He's in the garden with Peter. After all," springing to her feet, "I think I'll go with you."

"In that gown?"

Mrs. Gaveston pauses a moment, but she has got out of the habit of being checked.

"I can throw the tail over my arm," says she lightly. "And even if I *do* it an injury, why, I don't care! I hate it. It's too expensive! I feel sure I've been swindled by that woman; and after all I can always order another."

She runs out of the room and down the stairs, far more lightly than Nell.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Men who have but little business, are generally great talkers."

"SHE ought to be ashamed of herself," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in her deepest tones.

"Who is it now?" asks her brother.

There is a smile—if a rather bored one, upon Sir Stephen's face.

"Bella Chance! without a farthing in the world, she is evidently bent on making a show." Mrs. Cutforth-Boss would have been indignant if anyone had told her she ever dropped into the lighter modes of expression of the present day, which she calls "slang," but sometimes unconsciously she uses them. "So ridiculous of her. Look at her gown. Ten guineas, if a penny."

"She is such a young woman, and so *very* charming," says Mrs. McGregor in her soft voice. She is herself an elderly woman and decidedly plain. But some plain and elderly women are very delightful to look at, and Mrs. McGregor is one of them. She is looking a little tired now, having been moving about amongst her guests for the past hour, and has thankfully accepted the seat next to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss that Sir Stephen has pushed forward. A woman of an entirely sweet nature herself, she has been able to see beneath the crust of Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's and to acknowledge the crude worth that lies beneath.

"And uncommonly pretty," says Sir Stephen.

His sister casts a sharp glance at him.

Below, the gardens are sparkling in the sunlight. It is hardly yet the "time of the roses," as June is waiting for poor old May to die, but other flowers are flaunting their delicacies here and there and everywhere. To their left the tennis courts are making a gay racket, and beyond them again the rapt golfers are playing most anxiously and excitedly, although the links are tiny, and the whole thing a mere drawing-room game.

The McGregors are "at home" to-day. Scotch people, who had taken a very beautiful place in this small neighborhood ten years ago—Heaven alone knows why—and who are just now being acknowledged as residents. For those ten years they had been regarded as outsiders and strangers, although they are of good family, and better off than anyone around them; still they have not been *born* into the purple of Bigley-on-Sea, and the careful controllers of that small place are shy of strangers. Ten years, however, prove many things, and lately it has been acknowledged with *caution* that the McGregors are quite all they ought to be, and quite worthy of being admitted into the bosom of the Bigley-on-Seas. They had been kindly received, certainly, in the beginning—

they were immensely rich—but received as outsiders. *Now*, within the last year, they are being admitted to the inner circle, the very heart of this little aristocratic place.

Mrs. McGregor has been described, if one *could* describe her. That is, all the *goodness* of her. And Mr. McGregor, a burly Scotchman, need hardly be described. One daughter born to this house requires only a line or two, though she is an heiress, and that on a very big scale too. A tall girl, ugly, with good manners, splendid freckles—as freckles count—the reddest hair in Europe, and a snub nose it would be hard to beat.

"She *may* be pretty," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "I'm not a judge of those things. To be good is to be beautiful in my eyes, and there are other people *called* pretty—Bella, for example; as to *her*——" She kindly refrains from further explanation. "I shall speak to her, I really *shall*. She wants someone to give her some sound and honest advice, and I, as a cousin of hers, am the fit and proper person."

"Poor Bella!" says Sir Stephen.

"For once I agree with you, Stephen," says his sister, who, as has been already said, is totally devoid of the Divine gift of tact. "She is much to be pitied; a mere inconsequent creature with no ballast!"

"You can supply it," says Sir Stephen, pleasantly.

"Well, I hope so—I *think* so." She turns to Mrs. McGregor. "What a tremendous crowd you have here to-day."

"Yes, yes," says her gentle hostess, colouring a little. There is no doubt but that some of the off-skirts of Society are here to-day. Good people and kindly, but hardly—*hardly* county folk. "Of course there *are* a few—who—but—it makes them so happy," says Mrs. McGregor nervously. "And it is well to do that. And—we are all brothers and sisters, you know."

"'Pon my word, when you come to think of it, it is just so," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "But, then, when you were about it, why didn't you ask your butcher and baker—*they're* your brothers too," says she.

Sir Stephen turns a dark red at this frightful rudeness, and makes a slight attempt to speak, but checks himself. If Maria has been born so entirely without decency,

how is anyone to supply it?—certainly not *he*. A quick memory of his mother comes back to him—fair, gentle, tall; and of his father—a bluff old squire, but incapable of a *bêtise* of this sort.

Meantime, Mrs. McGregor has risen.

"We'll discuss it later," says she, with undiminished sweetness. Some late guest has just arrived, to her everlasting delight. Her principles have always been a difficulty to the gentle woman, and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss has just given her a nasty filip. If she has asked So-and-so because he is a brother and a Christian, then why not ask her bootmaker, who is, beyond doubt, the most Christian man in the neighborhood?

Poor Mrs. McGregor goes forward to greet her guests with a heart most ill at ease.

"I wonder if it ever occurs to you, Maria, how abominable a thing it is to hurt the feelings of anyone," says Sir Stephen angrily, when his hostess is well out of hearing. "I believe you pride yourself upon being strong-minded; but if having a strong mind means being capable of making one of the gentlest women you know extremely uncomfortable, I think it would be a merciful thing to be born without one."

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss looks at him with calm astonishment.

"I suppose you are alluding to what I said to her just now?"

"Certainly I am. To tell a woman to her face that her guests are beneath notice is, to say the least of it——"

"Stephen," interrupts his sister solemnly, "it has always been a grief to me that you won't go *into things*! Now, what Mrs. McGregor wants is *solid advice*. She is a good woman—that I admit—but a most mistaken one. She—it is a frightful thing to say—but, in my opinion, she is fast developing into a *Socialist*. She would have *all men* on an equality—you heard her yourself."

"Indeed, I heard nothing of the kind!"

"I daresay. I have often thought you a little wanting in intelligence!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss warningly. There is not a note of malice in this speech, she is as a fact very fond of her brother. "You should cultivate *observation*! I feel I must speak to you about that some day, Stephen. Really the people that poor woman has

gathered here to-day! You know I am not bigotted about the masses, but one *mu't* draw a line occasionally. Now those Biggs!—*who* are they?"

"Very respectable people!"

"Entirely so. And as I pointed out to Mrs. McGregor, so are her butcher and baker; really the baker is about the best man we have at our penny readings—so well-read for a man of his station—twice as well-read as those Biggs!"

"Still there's a difference between a baker, and a—gentleman farmer."

"'Gentleman farmer' includes so much. By the bye, are you going to ask the Biggs to the Towers next Friday?"

"No," says Sir Stephen, and then feels himself the biggest snob on earth. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss laughs; she has scored here.

"After all, I was wrong, you have *some* intelligence!" says she.

The grounds are now growing very full. Lady Hopkins has come—always, in spite of the brewery, a little celebrity; and she has brought in her train several young people. She is fond of young people, and they are fond of her.

The Gavestons have just come too, and Mrs. McGregor hurries forward to meet them.

Cecilia has brought her husband and Nell, and a young man who is often a visitor at Gaveston Park, with her. He turns up, indeed, so frequently at the Park, that he is already quite an old friend of everybody at Bigley-on-Sea.

He is an Irishman, and his name is Michael McNamara, and one minute's conversation with him would tell the most simple-minded that he hailed from the county Cork.

His brogue is the most mellifluous thing on record, and there have been rude people who have said you could hang your hat on it; but he is a beautiful Irish boy for all that, and very full of the *best* sweetness and light.

His age no man knoweth, but he looks about twenty-five; his manners *occasionally*, however, would bring him down to the five *without* the twenty! In fact he is sometimes—it is sad to relate it—a little trying to his friends.

For all that, his friends at Gaveston Park like him more than ordinary, and Nell, who is only a week-old acquaintance of his, considers herself now, on this, the seventh day of it, quite a settled chum.

Cecilia has dropped languidly into a chair, and Mrs. Chance, who is looking very pretty in her new black frock, that is of a most tenderly if fashionably sad kind, has seated herself beside her. *Why*, it would be hard to imagine, as Mrs. Gaveston is at times a little difficult to get on with, unless it is because Nell is standing close to her sister, and Sir Stephen close to Nell.

Mrs. Chance from time to time during her animated conversation with Cecilia—which is altogether on one side, as the capricious Cecilia has decided she does not like her—glances towards Nell and Sir Stephen.

Nell is in her prettiest mood. She is evidently what Mrs. Chance calls (who is certainly very vulgar *inwardly*) “plaguing Sir Stephen.” Where is Alec? Mrs. Chance looks hurriedly round for her brother. He had seemed so distinctly *épris* with this interfering girl only yesterday, at Lady Hopkins’. Ah! there he is! And, evidently, looking for someone. She leans lightly forward, and casually, as it were, draws out her handkerchief. The white spot on the green landscape catches her brother’s eye; he looks up to the terrace above him and sees his sister.

She makes a slight gesture, smiling delicately (a sister can always let her brother know what she means when she *wants* to), and in a moment he turns and comes straight to where Nell is sitting. He feels very grateful to Bella. He had been looking helplessly for Miss Prendergast for the past ten minutes.

The little group on the terrace has grown quite large now. Miss Prendergast, from beneath the shelter of a big white hat, is looking, with the suggestion of an exquisitely dawning friendship, now at Sir Stephen and now at Alec Grant; perhaps sometimes Grant gets one glance in to the good. If he does, however, it is not without the bestower of it knowing all about it.

“Golf is going on over there,” says Sir Stephen presently, when a second glance has been purposely given to Alec, without one to him coming in between.

“Yes?”

"You like it?" questioningly.

"Ye-es, very much," with hesitation.

"There is tennis over here," says Grant quietly.

"Oh, I know; but the courts are all full."

"No," eagerly, "one will soon be vacant; that's what I came to tell you. Will you have a set with me?"

"I should like it," says Nell slowly. Sir Stephen walks away. Nell casts a swift look after him, and laughs inwardly, after which she settles down to a steady flirtation with Grant.

Bella Chance is carrying on still her desultory conversation with Mrs. Gaveston, and in the distance Mrs. Cutforth-Boss is giving advice to a young woman who is beginning to look faint.

"Who's that?" asks Mr. McNamara, regarding the former anxiously. She had been holding a meeting in the North on "The power of well-directed advice," when last he was at Bigley-on-Sea.

"That's Mrs. Cutforth-Boss," says Nell, bending towards him with an admonishing air.

"Boss? American?"

They all laugh.

"My dear fellow," says Grant, who, though he is her cousin, or because of it, detests her cordially. "Look at her clothes!"

"Well, she ought to be, with a frightful name like that."

"It isn't her name, however, it's her husband's," says Bella Chance. "Her own was quite a nice one—Wortley." Mrs. Chance seems to linger over the nice name, lovingly.

"I bet her husband thinks it a pity she didn't stick to it," says Mr. McNamara, buoyantly.

"Oh, no; he is quite a *friend* of hers," says Nell. "Isn't he, Mrs. Chance? You know," mischievously, "Mrs. Chance is her cousin."

"Oh—er—I say!" mumbles Mickey wretchedly, going under. To his intimates—and they are nearly everyone—Mr. McNamara is always Mickey. He grows very red and casts a thunder and lightning glance at Nell, who receives it nobly. She *might* have given him a wink, anyway! However, to tell the truth of Mickey, he is full of pluck, and presently he comes to the surface

smiling. "Never would have thought it," says he, beaming tenderly on Mrs. Chance. "Cousins, as a rule, are as alike as peas, but in this instance, I'm bound to say you're all the peas and she's all the pods!"

This elegant compliment is received most graciously by Bella.

"You needn't apologise," says she, with a faint grimace. "I'm not a bit angry." She has said hardly anything, but to Mickey it becomes perfectly clear that she could see her cousin, Maria Boss, toasting before a slow fire, without so much as a protest.

"You're *so* good!" says Mr. McNamara sweetly. "Well, I won't, then; but I confess I'm curious about your cousin. What does she do, eh?"

"Do?"

"Yes. She's bound to live up to a name like that anyway."

"Oh, she does—she does," says Mrs. Gaveston, breaking in with a faint shrug of her pretty shoulders, "she 'bosses' this village all through!"

There is a slight pause.

CHAPTER IX.

"Love is strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

McNAMARA is laughing.

Mrs. Chance lets her perpetual smile fall into her lap this time. She is thinking, treasuring up little words here and there. There is no knowing how soon or how late they may be useful. This girl, Nell Prendergast, is in her way, and must be put out of it, and all that belongs to Nell Prendergast must be put out of it too. It will be amusing later on to tell Maria Boss what this disdainful pretty Mrs. Gaveston has said about her.

"I think I never saw so many girls together as to-day," says Mrs. Gaveston at this moment, looking over the railings of the top terrace to the grounds below. "They seem to have come in their thousands."

"Bound to!" says Mickey, sticking his glass into his

good eye by mistake—as a matter of fact, one eye is as good as the other, and both are remarkably lively, but he likes to think he is in danger of losing the left one. “There’s a new man come to the place. In fact he’s here. A guest of the McGregors; and a tremendous catch, I hear. No end of ha’pence!”

“What a wild romance,” says Mrs. Chance, who, however, beneath the lightness of her air seems interested. “And the hero of it?”

“Best fellow in the world. I met him in Donegal some years ago. He was staying there with some of us”—evidently Mr. McNamara’s family is large and united. “He has been in India for a bit, but is home now on sick leave. I only heard of his coming an hour ago, or I’d have gone in search of him.”

“But how a catch?” asks Mrs. Chance, with the lightest, the most casual air in the world. Alec had said nothing about *money*!

“Well, it seems his uncle died the other day, and left him the only original half-million.”

“Lucky man!” says Cecilia.

“To gain half a million?”

“Oh, no, I was thinking of the uncle. To die!”

“Cissie! what a queer thing to say,” says Nell, with a little frown. She looks distressed. Her brilliant sister looks back at her and laughs gaily.

“To die with half a million to leave! See what joy his death must have given to many—to one at all events, if we can credit Mickey’s tale.”

“Oh, you *can*,” says Mickey, dejectedly. “Lucky you may call *him*, anyway. Most of us have got uncles, but they seldom run to half a million, and when they do, they don’t leave it to *us*. They know better, they say. They might as well be fathers for all we get out of ‘em.”

“But really, Mickey——”

“Oh, I know. I’m an authority,” says Mickey, with open disgust. “Think I don’t know about uncles. The rich ones—who *give*—I confess I don’t know about them; they belong to the few, but as to the others, I’m all there. I know them well to my sorrow. Most of *my* uncles are borrowers!” Mickey shakes his head sadly. Evidently his relations have led him a life or two.

"And the rest of them lenders," says Alec Grant, with an ill-suppressed grin.

"Oh, hang it! That's a beastly old joke," says Mickey. He catches the third and last leg of the stool on which Grant is sitting, and brings him lightly to the ground.

"I say, look here, this is very low treatment," says Grant, laughing.

"I wish it could have brought you lower."

"Well, isn't it true? You've more uncles among the lenders than the bor——"

"He's not well," says Mickey, interrupting him just in time, and with an air full of anxiety. "High-overs don't agree with him."

"They do," says Grant, who has fallen right at Nell's feet, and now shows no disposition to get up again.

"I was telling you, I think, Mrs. Gaveston," says Mickey, "about the *rara avis* that has flown into our midst. Such a beautiful bird! He is," glancing cautiously from right to left, "staying here, so we must be careful what we say."

"Why? Is he deformed?" asks Mrs. Gaveston, in her pretty tired way.

"Tut!" says Mickey. "One of the handsomest men in England, I hear—beats the record for *this* year. They say he is engaged to the divine Elspeth."

"Beauty and the beast then," says Mrs. Chance.

"Oh! poor beast!"

"By Jove!" says McNamara at this minute, "here he comes!"

Nell has not heard this whisper, and Grant, who is now falling into a deeply interesting discussion with her, does not hear it either. Cecilia, however, does. And turns a languid glance in the supposed direction of the coming of the conquering hero. So slowly does she turn, however, that before her eyes reach the desired point, they find themselves arrested, and returning a very curious glance from Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who is sitting about three yards away.

The glance is so curious—so—so *expectant*, as it were—though what is there to expect?—that it arrests Cecilia's attention. She is still wondering about it, when a voice near her says:

"He is an old friend of yours, isn't he?"

Mrs. Chance is bending towards her, the usual smile in her eyes is a little enlarged now, and there are a few grains of vindictiveness in it. She knows what is coming, and knew all the time, for the matter of that, whilst Mickey was idly chattering and her brother laying siege to Nell, but to see the *dénouement*—to find this lovely, unfriendly woman a little at fault would be, she told herself, a quick delight to her. Of course, it might not come off—but if it did—well, it would be a shaft in her quiver for Sir Stephen. A family like that; the elder sister so—so—unprincipled—and the girl—. One could see that she ran the same road—so impossible—so fast, in a *little* way, no doubt. But little things always grew!

"He? Who?" asks Cecilia, in the *pale* sort of way in which she always addressed Mrs. Chance. If Mrs. Cutforth-Boss is objectionable to her, Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's cousin is a thousand times more so. She looks indifferently at Bella, who is really looking her best, and extraordinarily young in a new black gown with a little—a *very* little crape upon it.

Mrs. Chance is opening her lips to answer, when suddenly Grant rises to his feet, and calls aloud to someone. Someone who is just here.

"Why, Stairs, old fellow, is that you? I say, Phil, I thought you weren't coming till next week."

Mrs. Gaveston looks quickly round. She makes a slight effort as if to rise, and then desists. The effort is beyond her. Her colour is all gone, but her eyes have gained in brilliancy! They are staring—staring——

"I didn't really mean to come till next week," says someone.

Her face grows rigid. She leans back in her seat, a faint, unheard groan escapes her. Oh, God! that voice. That voice!

CHAPTER X.

“My bed and pillow are cold,
 My heart is faint with dread.
 The air hath an odour of mould.
 I dream I lie with the dead,
 I cannot move,
 O, come to me, love,
 Or else I am dead.”

For a moment Cecilia knows nothing. It is the barest moment, but to her it seems like a century. And what it holds!

All her youth, her sweetness, her delight, her dreams of loving and being loved. Had she ever known till now—now, after the passing of so many dead, *dead* years—that she had ever lived? Ah! then—then she *had* lived. But did she know it *then*?

Coming back to herself, she is conscious of a strange cold chill. Her hands are like ice, and her lips are frozen. She feels frozen, body and soul.

* * * * *

Then it is all over. It had been a sickening moment, but it is over for ever! and she wakes to find herself in her chair with Mrs. Chance's searching blue eyes fixed full upon her.

Everyone is looking in the direction of the new-comer, so that very few have noticed the shock she had sustained; no one, indeed, except Bella Chance and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. They had seen all.

That sudden brilliant light in Mrs. Gaveston's eyes, the sudden leaning forward, the abortive attempt to rise, the slight unconsciousness—all had been seen by those four watchful eyes. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, most virtuous of women, had kept the frivolous Cecilia in view all the time, whilst Cecilia unfortunately had forgotten her existence.

But now Cecilia is wide awake, the shock is all gone, it is drifting away, leaving her behind it, high and dry. It had been so *stupid*, that first thought—as if she and

Phil had ever been anything more than friends—mere friends. She, an old married woman, with a child!

The thought of the child gives her a queer feeling for a moment . . . but it goes by—floating away with the rest. She laughs to herself as it goes away from her—sailing—sailing so lightly. And rising to her feet she goes forward.

Her eyes are fixed on the strange young man—over there at the end of the terrace. Her lips are parted, a happy smile now plays upon them. Unthinking to the last, she hardly knows why she smiles; she never dreams how her smile is interpreted. He is her friend—her friend only. He is very near her now; but so far he has not seen her.

He is a tall, very dark and very handsome man of about thirty, with a face well bronzed by an Indian sun; and many people are standing round him, talking to him and giving him a cordial welcome home.

He has just turned away from a lively reception from Mickey, when a soft sound comes to him that makes his heart stand still.

"Phil," says a low and lovely voice.

He turns. . . . To see—the one love of his life! the lost love of his life!—before him.

Of course he knew he must meet her when he accepted Mrs. McGregor's invitation to Bigley, and he had steeled himself against this interview—had thought it all out, how to meet her and so on—had indeed been looking out for her all the afternoon; yet now, face to face with her once more after six long years, his self-possession *almost* fails him. Almost, not quite. He so far forgets himself, however, as to stare blankly at her for a full second without seeing her outstretched palm.

"It's me," says Cecilia softly. It is the sweetest, if the most ungrammatical little exclamation—and young, almost childish. Indeed, on poor Cecilia, the appearance of Stairs has had so strange, so strong an influence, that it has carried her back to the old days, when she was hardly out of her short frocks, or, at all events, only just into her long ones.

Her colour has deepened. A soft light has sprung into her eyes.

"Phil! you remember me?" Her smile now is one

of clear delight—open, frank. The idea of concealment of any sort is outside and beyond it altogether. She holds out both her hands to him, with the palms upheld in the happiest way. That first nervousness has gone from her. It is as though it had never been. Here is her childhood's—her girlhood's friend. It would be absurd to say she has *forgotten* to think of who may be looking on as she holds out her hands to him, or of what they may be thinking, or how judging her. To *her* there is nothing to think about, save joy at the recovery of Phil; there is no thought of evil in her mind, of sin, or of regret. Everything seems blotted out in her save he, and the memory of the old sweet days, when he had been all the world to her, and she *his* universe.

Stairs has quite recovered himself now, and advances to her calmly, coldly, even although his heart is on fire. The very quick, open cordiality of her greeting has, more than all else, assured him of her indifference to him. She had never cared! What a fool! What a *fool* he had been!

He smiles pleasantly, takes both the little outstretched hands so daintily clad in their dove-grey suèdes, and presses them lightly.

"I remember," says he.

The words might have had significance, but for the extreme carelessness of the utterance. They sound unemotional—dead. Cecilia's soft smile fades, and with slow haste, if one may so describe it, she withdraws her hands. Mrs. Chance, who has an unpleasant trick of studying her neighbours' moods, retires behind her fan, and gives way to secret mirth.

"Sold," says she to herself softly. As has been said, she is very vulgar when *alone*.

Stairs murmurs a word or two to Cecilia (who answers him a little absently), then moves, passes through the group upon the terrace, and running down the grass steps, goes apparently towards the golfers.

When hidden from the view of those upon the terrace, he however turns aside, and plunging into the wood, is lost to sight for the rest of this gay afternoon.

"How may a man in smart
Find matter to rejoice?"

* * * * *

"How extremely good-looking," says Mrs. Chance, leaning towards Cecilia, and purposely addressing her.

"Who? Captain Stairs?" says Nell, breaking in quickly. Something about Cecilia strikes her as strange, and, without understanding it, it has disturbed her; has given her a queer, unexplained feeling, that she ought to come to her help in some way. And Mrs. Chance's eyes are so penetrating, so *very* blue. "Good-looking?"

"Handsome, rather."

"Oh, do you think so? We usen't to think him handsome, used we, Cissy? You remember, long ago? I was almost a baby then, and you—a betwixt and between. Handsome! But then he was like a brother to us, and one never thinks one's brother handsome. That might account for it."

"Except," says Mrs. Chance sweetly, "that he," she looks again at Cecilia, as if speaking to her, "*wasn't* your brother."

"No, *like* one, I said." Nell's voice rings a little sharp.

"Yes. That was what she said," says Grant, who is again reclining at her feet. There is an air of protection in his tone.

"It doesn't matter what I said," says Nell supremely, speaking to him only now, and feeling a little annoyed with him for his support. "And I wish you would get up, you are sitting on my dress. I think, on the whole, you are about as tiresome a person as ever I met in my life."

"I hope you haven't met many," says Grant, whose temper as a rule is excellent. He looks amused.

"No," says Nell. She struggles with herself, and then gives way to laughter. "Anyway, you are the worst," says she, but so delightfully, and with such a half-merry, half-defiant glance from under her lids, as makes her sweeter than ever.

Grant has risen indeed at her command, but now he is leaning over her chair, whispering little nothings to her, and Mrs. Chance seeing him, and Nell's evident pleasure in his society, feels a sense of relief. If only she will fall in love with Alec, what a good thing for him—what a good thing for her—Bella!

"Oh, hang it! Here comes Nobbs," says McNamara

suddenly, in a voice of horror, that is a little more Irish than usual.

"Then I'm going," says Nell.

"No, no. You shan't. You *can't*," says McNamara, seizing her skirt, and compelling her to reseal herself. "I'll hold you. Do you think we are going to be left to his tender mercies, without protection of *any* kind? Why, I believe you are the only person in the whole place who has been free from persecution from him. He hasn't fired one quotation at you yet."

"That's what frightens me! I feel he has been making up a regular fusillade for my benefit alone, and when it comes off——"

"Here he is!" says Mickey. "He's going for *us*! He's coming *here*! We ought to be prepared, you know. He's coming, primed and loaded; I *know* it by his air. Who's going to stand the first shot?"

"I don't mind his quotations," says Mrs. Chance disdainfully. It is a comfort to her to be able to disdain someone openly.

"You're a brave woman," says the Irishman. "I confess I always go down before them—riddled."

"Good gracious! what's the matter with his hair?" asks Cecilia suddenly. She has quite recovered from her late excitement. That coldness of Stairs' has restored her to the old calm feeling—or she thinks it has.

"Now that you mention it," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a voice that comes from her boots—she wouldn't wear shoes for anything. "I think his hair is changed."

"It is certainly a very remarkable colour," says Nell.

"Nothing to what it was when last I saw it," says Mickey. "That's a year ago. It was then pea-green."

"Nonsense, Mickey."

"Fact, I assure you. It appears he had put on a trifle too much of the Infallible, and it came out like that. Dyes *do* sometimes, even in the best regulated families!"

Mrs. Chance is laughing.

"How did he explain it?"

"Gave out he had the cholera, and hid himself away in his bedroom for three weeks."

"Then how did *you* see him?" asks Nell severely.

"*In* the bedroom of course," airily. "Think anything

would daunt me in the cause of science? I wanted to know how the dye had come out pea-green; but—would you believe it?—he refused to give me any information on the subject. Very low, I call it. But what *can* you expect of a man who sold a dog to a friend of mine, and——?”

“Well?”

“Well. He said it was an Irish terrier, but it turned out a *Dachshund*!”

“Oh, I really can't believe *that*, Mickey.”

“You may, however.”

“The friend, anyway, had the best of the bargain,” says Grant. “*Dachshunds*, if pure, are valuable.”

“Yes, of course, that's why I say one can expect nothing from him. He's a perfect fool.”

“Hush! he's here,” says Grant.

“And a beauty he is!” says Mr. McNamara.

CHAPTER XI.

“He said, or right or wrong, what came into his head.”

HERE he is indeed, and perforce the conversation comes to an end.

Mr. Nobbs is a little man, spare and pale, but of exuberant spirits. He is perhaps the most universally detested person in this small place, being one of those dreadful people who can spring a quotation at you at any moment, be it prose or poetry. He lives in a tiny villa outside the town, “Bachelor Villa,” as he has coquettishly named it, and as *yet*, it has not crumbled into dust about his head, although many prayers have been uplifted to that effect. He walks on his toes, and has a most irritating way of turning his head to one side like a cock-robin when meaning to be specially charming. His handkerchiefs are always perfumed, and he has an abominable simpering way of boasting about his success with the “fair sex” (as he calls them in his own amazing fashion), that enrages every man of his acquaintance. On the whole, however, he is a harmless little creature

(though he would have had apoplexy if you had told him so), but *frightfully* irritating.

He now advances on Mrs. Gaveston. She is Nell's sister, and therefore very near the rose. Nell is the latest importation, and therefore the most deserving of his attention. Besides, she is beautiful, and Mr. Nobbs, as he always says, "adores the beautiful in *any* shape." It is a little formula of his.

Coming to anchor before Mrs. Gaveston, he says, with the turn of his head that they all know so well, and that makes them so often desire to commit murder:

"'Angel! ever bright and fair.'"

"Thank you, Mr. Nobbs," says Cecilia, breaking into a merry laugh, a laugh that is echoed by every one, to Mr. Nobbs' intense delight, who believes it arises from this latest betrayal of his wit. "But the original makes it 'Angels.' It is *too* good of you to make me the only recipient of your bounty."

"Ah, as for that," says Nobbs, bobbing and bowing, "you see I heard—I *saw*—that a replica of yours was here," he beams upon Nell, who, to her everlasting chagrin, dissolves into merriment behind her racket. She had so wanted to be dignified.

She has to come from behind it almost immediately, however. Her sister's voice reaches her.

"Nell! Mr. Nobbs wishes to be introduced to you. Mr. Nobbs—Miss Prendergast."

Nell bows gracefully. The little man bows back to her, and at once establishes himself at her side, to Grant's disgust.

At this moment Sir Stephen, against his better judgment, again appears upon the scene, coming up the grass step. He pauses as he gains the top, looking round him. For a seat, as Mrs. Cutforth-Boss thinks—for Nell, thinks Mrs. Chance. The latter beckons to him and ruffles her skirts a little to one side in a suggestive way.

"We can make room for you here," says she.

"No. I'd crush you—and I like standing," says Wortley. Still he goes towards her, and would perhaps have taken the despised seat after all but for a word from Nell.

That disgraceful coquette leans forward.

"Sir Stephen, come here."

"There isn't room," says Grant to her in a low reproachful tone.

"No, really," says Mrs. Chance. She makes another effort with her new and charming skirts, and beckons to Sir Stephen. "I can give you a seat."

But Nell's eyes are on Sir Stephen's, and her lips are smiling. They are smiling all the more happily because she has taken Mrs. Chance's thoughts off Cecilia, who again is growing so silent, that people will perhaps be wondering—speculating! What *can* be the matter with Cissy?

"Come here!" says she, "I want a word with you—one word." Her face is delightful now. "Only a *little* one!"

Sir Stephen goes to her, stepping over the widow's trailing skirts as he does so, and Mrs. Chance's face grows dark.

"Well?" says Sir Stephen to Nell. He is evidently expecting the "word."

"I want," says Nell, turning her fair and fresh and lovely face up to his, "to know who is that *very* ugly girl down there."

"Good Heavens!" cries Mr. McNamara tragically, "are you so ignorant as that? Oh! come, I've got to post you up in your surroundings. Behold in me a map of your little Bigley-on-Sea. Why, that's your host's daughter. His own, and only one. She belongs to the class that we so often read of, but so seldom see—'The Heiress.'"

"She looks it," says Mrs. Chance drily.

"She seems a very good girl," says Nell, "and affectionate. I've noticed that she is going about with her mother all the day."

"That's fatal," says Mrs. Chance. "The daughter who stays at her mother's elbow all day, only stays there because she can't get anyone to stay at *her* elbow all day. It must be a perfect affliction to have a girl like that."

"I expect she'll have that affliction for some time," says Grant.

"But I understood," says Mrs. Chance, directing a smiling glance at Cecilia, who looks back at her unmoved, "that she is hardly so forlorn as you think—that Captain Stairs is a little *épris* with her."

"She has money," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss suddenly.

"But so has he," says Grant. "And therefore what on earth would he marry a girl like that for?"

"'Much desires more!'" quoted Mr. Nobbs in his sprightliest manner. Really he is wonderful. He is always *all* there.

"Certainly she is very ugly," says Nell, in a regretful tone. "But——"

"There isn't a but," says Mickey. "My good child, look at her *nose*!"

"And her eyes," says Grant. "Gooseberries!"

"And her freckles."

"Oh! I like freckles," says Nell. "But her mouth—it is very big certainly."

"It is, poor girl," says Mickey. "You didn't hear about her, did you, at their last party here, a year ago? No. It's a pitiful tale. They had Aunt Sally at the end of the ground over there. And there were some strangers here, and poor Miss McGregor was standing a few yards from the real Auntie, and unfortunately the strangers mistook the whole thing, and thought that *she* was Aunt Sally, and sent a shower of sticks at her. She didn't understand what it meant, poor thing, until one of the sticks hit her on the right eye!"

"Oh, now, Mickey, I can hardly believe——"

"I'm not surprised, I'm sure. She could hardly believe it herself. Such an insult. It hurt her very much, I can tell you—especially the eye."

"Te—he—he," says Mr. Nobbs, in his most aggravating simper. "One can see it. Her eye 'In a fine frenzy rolling.' Te—he—he!"

A ghastly silence greets this brilliant burst of wit. But Mrs. Chance breaks it.

"Do you know, Mr. Nobbs, you're *too* funny. You are, really. You oughtn't to spring your wit on people like that. It—well, it makes them feel—oh! *so* strange. When people are very clever and very well read, like you, they should remember that others——"

"Ah! now—come now—honestly you flatter me," says Mr. Nobbs, his head *very* much on one side now. "No, really you mustn't. You ladies spoil me so. But

'Woman! lovely woman! Nature made thee
To temper man; we had been brutes without you.'

This delicate compliment he conveys with uplifted voice and hands delicately gesticulating, whilst pirouetting softly on his toes.

Somebody repeats the word "brutes," but this time in the singular. And Cecilia, leaning back in her chair, nearly goes into hysterics behind her fan.

Mr. McNamara is looking at him with the most rapt attention.

"Could you do it again, Nobbs?" asks he, in a low, breathless tone.

"Do——?"

"That little recitation?"

"Oh! Really! 'Pon my *word*! a mere passing thought, you know, impelled to the surface by all the fairness round me. I——"

"We are to have a penny reading next week," says McNamara. "If you would kindly"—here he pauses, checked by a vigorous and, it must be confessed, excessively painful kick from Grant, but he goes on nobly, nevertheless—"consent——"

"Mr. McNamara!" cries Mrs. Chance quickly, "my glove—*See*."

It has indeed fallen over the terrace on which they are seated to the one below.

"I see it," says McNamara calmly. "There are no lions here to-day, so I need not jump, I think. I'll get it for you presently. What I was saying, my dear Nobbs, was, that if you would kindly consent to favour us with one of your magnificent recitations, of which——"

Here Sir Stephen drops a lace antimacassar lightly over his head, but *through* it Mr. McNamara—proving thus his indomitable spirit—speaks with all his native dignity.

"—Of which we all have heard so much, you would bestow upon us an inestimable benefit. Mrs. Gaveston, who is one of our most esteemed patronesses, will, I am sure, add her entreaties to mine."

He here so far emerges from the antimacassar, as to catch Cecilia's eye, upon whom he confers a wink, mild but firm. It is impossible to retreat, so Cecilia murmurs something or other that might be taken for anything in the world.

It is taken with effusion by Mr. Nobbs. Delighted, he

was sure—nay, too pleased. Any *little* efforts of his—the “little” so accentuated as to leave it open that it should be “*great*”—were always at the disposal of “Te—he—he, ‘A thing of beauty, and a joy for ever.’”

“I’d love to kick him,” says Grant, *sotto voce* to his cousin, Sir Stephen.

“Poor little brute! You’d kill him,” said Sir Stephen contemptuously.

“A good thing too,” says Grant.

“Where’s Captain Stairs?” asks Nobbs presently. “I heard he was here. I quite recollect meeting him some years ago.”

“He’s gone for a prow!” says Mrs. Chance.

“Indeed? Where? In what direction, may I ask?”

“You *may*,” says McNamara, with avidity. “Do you see those trees over there? He went right down to that tent.” He is pointing, I regret to say, in the very direction that Stairs had *not* taken.

“I think I’ll go after him.”

“Do. He’ll be delighted,” says McNamara warmly.

“What on earth did you ask him to take part in the penny readings for?” asks Cecilia indignantly, when he is gone.

“Why shouldn’t I? There was no buffoon engaged as far as I could hear.”

“Except you, Mickey,” says Sir Stephen, whereon Mickey throws things at him.

Nell is looking meditative.

“It must be dreadful to be as ugly as Mr. Nobbs,” says she, at last. Her glance *unfortunately* turns to Cecilia, as though addressing the remark to her—to Cecilia, who so seldom thinks, and who to-day is a little more outside herself than ever. She laughs back at her sister.

“He’s even uglier than Peter!” says she gaily. Her mind has been running on Peter for the last hour—ever since the memory of her betrothal and marriage to him had been brought back to her with such cruel force. As the words pass her lips, however, they frighten her a little—a very little! Who has heard her? She glances quickly round. Only Nell, who is looking a little sad—for *her*—and Mrs. Chance. “Oh!” cries she, with a sudden touch of contrition, but still, in spite of all, with an irrepressible laugh. “*Poor old Peter!*”

"I don't think Peter ugly," says Nell, with a little thoughtful frown, as if considering Peter, bringing him up before her mental vision, and judicially putting him upon trial.

"Of course not," says Peter's wife. "I merely called him ugly——"

"As a term of endearment!" suggests Mrs. Chance, with her perpetual smile, that has so often a touch of venom in it.

"Perhaps," says Cecilia, looking at her. The pretty girlish face is almost unreadable now. It has put on a mask—a very calm and thoughtful one.

"Used you to call *your* husband ugly?" asks she sweetly.

Mrs. Chance changes colour. The late owner of the charming widow had, indeed, been excessively ugly, not only in all his works and in all his ways, but in his appearance besides. Cecilia's little dart had gone home.

"Your sense of humour seems deficient," says Mrs. Chance, with ill-suppressed anger. "I meant nothing but a mere jest."

"A mere—*ugly*—jest?"

"Another quip," says Mrs. Chance. She is trying to smile pleasantly, but she is very pale. Her footing in the society round her is very insecure, and to quarrel with the wife of Peter Gaveston would be to give herself away a good deal. Yet to refrain, to hold back, to lower a weapon before Cecilia Gaveston or her sister seems more than her strength is equal to.

"Oh! a quip, of course," asks Nell, breaking into the moment very eagerly if quietly. Surely things have gone far enough? And *why* is Cecilia so foolish, so *silly*, as to quarrel with this woman, who seems to her, Nell, such a horrid person, and so full of queer little ways. "And besides, when one loves a person, one never thinks him ugly."

"And when one doesn't?" says Mrs. Chance, always smiling.

"Oh! *then*, of course, the defects stand clear."

Mrs. Chance nods lightly at Cecilia. There is consummate impertinence in the nod.

"I think it was *you* who suggested Mr. Gaveston was ugly," says she.

Cecilia looks calmly back at her. She is young, frivolous, in many ways wanting, but just now she rises so far above her usual indolence, as to let her spirit override that of the woman who has been so studiously rude to her. She looks with a little wrinkled brow of disdain at Mrs. Chance for a moment or two, then tilts back her chair so far that her pretty open-work stockings and high-heeled shoes can be seen. McNamara is just behind her. She nods to him, and he bends down to her.

"What a *very* vulgar person!" says she, in a whisper indeed, but one distinctly audible to—Mrs. Chance.

CHAPTER XII.

"Bees hum all day amid the young spring leaves,
The rooks caw loud from every elm-tree bough,
The sparrows twitter in the old church eaves—
But no voice cries for me or calls me now."

To round the cliffs, and start for a long swift walk across the sandy soil to-day, is to be happy. The sea is a bright blue, with delicate little flounces of white swaying up and down upon it; now here, now there, and from rock to rock, the pale grey gulls are flying. Sometimes the ever-changing sea is grey, and sometimes green, but to-day it is blue—blue as the deepest sapphire, and brilliant as the diamond.

It glitters and glances in the sun-rays, the small, soft flecks of foam that ride on the bosom of every wave, making the glorious colour of it even more glorious. And up here on the top of the overhanging cliff, it is all colour too. Such a splendid blending. Here a blaze of yellow from the lesser St. John's Wort, and there the soft pink fleecy sweetness of the sea-clover, and beyond the gold of the tiny potentilla—and everywhere, mingled with these, deeper tinges still of red and white and blue, and as a background the faint lilac of the pretty ling. Truly, as sings Mr. Bridges, one of the sweetest of our later day poets:—

"The cliff-top has a carpet
Of lilac, gold, and green,
The blue sky bounds the ocean,
The white clouds scud between.

* * * * *

"A flock of gulls are wheeling
And wailing round my seat;
Above my head the heaven,
The sea beneath my feet."

Philip Stairs sitting on a chair of Nature's hewing, up here on this bold cliff, has little of heaven in his heart. Yesterday he had seen her for the first time after all these long six years. And all last night he had walked up and down his room, cursing her bitterly with each fresh pipe.

When first he heard of her marriage—when the news he would not believe at first, but later he was compelled to acknowledge—had come to him in Burmah, it had finished at once the last touches of boyhood in him. It laid bare to him the cruelty of life. The cruelty to *her*! For in his soul he had still held her true; coerced and driven and compelled by a scheming mother—but at heart the tender loving girl that he had known.

This thought, this secret belief helped him to live. It was too late for succour, for interference of any kind, but the memory of his pretty sweetheart dwelt with him always, saddening him, adding many years to him that he had not actually lived, but without hardening him. He grew less lighthearted it is true, but more earnest; and with a passionate desire to fill the void in his heart he flung himself into his work, and had already distinguished himself in many ways, and gained the friendship and respect of his colonel, when sickness struck him down, and after a terrible struggle with death he had pulled through sufficiently to be invalided home.

All the long voyage was filled with the thought that soon, somewhere, he should see once again the beloved, unforgotten face. He did not fear to see it. He had told himself lately that the old delight was over. Had passed as a dream in the night; that he could meet her fairly, as the wife of *another* man, and greet her as a friend only.

And yesterday he had seen her, had looked into her

eyes, noted the fairness of her, the sweetness, the unsurpassable charm, and knew that the old mad love was still alive, and deep, deeper than ever. He knew too, as he touched her hand, and met her smiling, careless welcome, that all his fond belief in her was dead.

She had not been coerced by her mother! She had seen the advantage of money, young as she was. He had not touched her heart at all in those poor dead days, when *his* heart had been touched to its death. She was frivolous only, a poor beautiful thing, and unworthy.

Rising, he goes slowly across the dry and sandy plain, to where a dark wood shows upon his left. A longing for cool shadows and dense places has come upon him. The glare here is terrible, searching his very soul as it were. It is impossible to feel alone in this vast brilliance—brilliance of sea and sky.

If he could only blot out yesterday. In spite of himself he dwells upon it, and that tries him. It is hideous to dwell upon the ruin of an idol, it leaves so little behind. Sometimes absolutely nothing. He would so gladly have drawn a sponge over the memory of Cecilia's smiling face, her outstretched welcoming hands.

But for yesterday, he might have gone on his way contented in a measure, and not knowing. But now it is clear to him. The old horrible pain is still here, the pain that rendered his nights sleepless, and his days interminable, six months ago.

He has seen her, and found her wanting—*there* lies the stab. Found her, more beautiful than ever, and steeped in worldliness. He had dreamed of her as sad, forlorn, and found her joyous, lovely, the very incarnation of idle content.

He is close to the wood now, and the dull, soft moan of the ocean is growing fainter. He has reached, indeed, the first tree, the outpost of the innumerable host behind, when the sound of a merry laugh reaches his ears. A breathless happy laugh, as of one running. It is clear and sweet.

He stands quite still for a moment, as if listening.

It is hers!

A second later an echo of it come to him—that laugh again, so like, yet so unlike. A child's laugh this time, also a little breathless, as if the owner of it is running

for dear life. All at once it becomes quite plain to him. Her child. *Hers!* His heart almost stops beating. He had not thought of that!

Turning, he would have gone back to the glare and the cold loneliness of the sea, but just at this moment the voices sound clearer. Nearer. Drawing his breath quickly, he waits. The bushes are pushed frantically aside, and into the open, and straight up to him, runs a child.

Such a beautiful creature, with Cecilia's hair and brow, and Cecilia's laughing mouth, but not Cecilia's eyes.

The boy, with all a happy child's belief in the goodness of everyone, rushes to Stairs, and precipitates himself into his arms.

"She's coming! She's coming! *Save me!*" shrieks he frantically, with a realism hardly to be surpassed. He has made up his mind indeed, that red Indians are pursuing him with a view to taking his scalp, and even as he clings to Stairs, he does not look at him, looks only backwards over his shoulder to where "the slaughterer" may soon be expected to appear. He has no thought for anything but the dreaded enemy!

He is rudely awakened from his pleasant seeming. Stairs has deliberately thrust him from him; not brutally or violently, but with a decision that has hatred in it; and the boy with childhood's quick perception of something wrong, turns, tottering a little from the push, and looks up at Stairs amazed. In all his short happy life, no one had ever rebuffed him before. No one had ever given him anything but fondling words and open arms. To the boy it is a revelation!

"Hah!" cries a merry, panting voice. "*Now I've got you!*"

CHAPTER XIII.

"Unto thee was I looking for the light and the glory of life,
And the Gods' doors shut behind me till the day of the uttermost
 strife,
And now thou hast taken my soul, thou wilt cast it into the
 night,
And cover thine head from the darkness, and turn thine eyes
from the light."

It is Cecilia, with her eyes aglow, and her cheeks flushed, and her hair distinctly riotous. All sorts of little love-locks are flying across her low broad brow. The run has weakened every pulse, and set her blood a-going. As she rushes out from the dark behind her, she looks a mere girl—a girl of seventeen once more. Age, baffled, has drawn behind her. To Stairs, it is the old Cecilia! *His* Cecilia! In *all* her moods and stages at once. The child, the romp, the lovely girl! It was like *that* she looked—that day—the week before he left—that day when she burst through the rhododendrons and cried "*Pouf*" to him in her little saucy way. Did she remember? *Could* she?

All at once Cecilia sees him. The happy rush forward is completely stopped. And where is the laugh? the jest? The smile is dead, the colour has faded! Where is the old Cecilia now?

A sickening pallor overspreads her face for a moment; a moment only. But it tells its tale. Stairs' heart is beating rapidly. After all—*does* she care?

His heart is beating, and with such thoughts. He thrusts them from him. Had he *wished* her unhappy? Has he wronged her? What does it all mean?

He had not noticed that first swift agitation of hers yesterday, the awakening as it really was of a soul within her; the gaiety only of her manner he *had* noticed—but where is that gaiety now?

Cecilia by this time has recovered herself. Her face is still pale, but the strangeness, the something that is almost fear, has gone from it. She is quite calm again, quite her idle, charming self. She is even wondering

lazily *why* it is that these two meetings with Phil Stairs should have been accompanied by that dull feeling of faintness. Perhaps he has brought back recollections of the life she led with her mother, just before her engagement to Peter—such wretched days! That is it, no doubt.

"Is that you, Philip?" says she prettily, but indifferently. She remembers his reception of her yesterday, when she had meant to show cordiality to an old friend. "How strange to meet you here. Do you know you quite startled me? You seem," looking at Geoffrey, who has drawn close to her, and who is glancing with undisguised dislike at Stairs, "to have startled my little son too."

"Your son," says Stairs. "*Yours!*" His eyes are fixed on hers.

"I think so," says Cecilia, smiling. She draws Geoffrey to her with one hand and presses his shapely, close-cropped, shining head against her heart. "Eh, Geoff?"

Geoffrey, for answer, clasps his arms around her slender waist.

"You see," says she, laughing, "he has taken possession of me."

"I see!" coldly.

A short pause.

"What's the matter with you?" asks Cecilia suddenly. "How changed you are. You *used* to be—*well*——" pausing.

"Well?" grimly.

"One of the nicest people in the world," says Mrs. Gaveston, without hesitation, and with a second smile more brilliant than her last. "At least I know *I* used to think so. But what has happened to you? I know India is a very hot place—has it dried you up beyond recognition? And in *six* years only?"

"Six years is a long time," says Stairs, who is wondering at her. What does she mean? Has she *any* meaning? Was there any real feeling in that pallor of five minutes ago?

"Long," she pauses, and a faint light comes into her eyes—a light that gives him the impression that she is looking backwards.

He studies that look attentively.

"Yes, yes," says she, sighing—not through any sort

of misery, but as though the unusual act of thinking has wearied her. "Certainly it is a long time, but after all it isn't a lifetime."

"Sometimes it is."

"Of course, if one *dies* at that happy age, but," with a quick, almost hungry glance at her child, "one so *seldom* does. Six years have changed *you*, however—wonderfully."

"And what have they done to you?"

"Nothing!" She makes a little exquisite gesture with her arms as if appealing to him. "Now what *have* they done—eh?"

Truly they have done nothing but enrich each charm she had. Standing as she now is, with her arms thrown towards him in an amused appeal, and her lovely face alight with laughter, and the handsome child clinging to her, she seems the very embodiment of beauty.

At this moment Geoffrey tightens his arms round her in fun, and, bending, she catches him and undoes his clasping fingers.

"Are you a bear, you naughty fellow, that you hug me so? Come, come, Captain Stairs is looking surprised at you."

"I don't care what he looks," says the boy distinctly, his dark velvety eyes staring straight at Stairs, who looks back at him with a terrible melancholy in his gaze.

"You must forgive him," says Cecilia prettily to Stairs. "He is dreadfully, *dreadfully* naughty sometimes; but when all is told, he's a *heart*! We are having a gipsy tea in the wood," pointing behind her, "and as you are so near, I hope you will join us. Nobody at all but ourselves, and Mickey McNamara, who is staying with us."

"I am sorry," begins Stairs, "I have to go——"

"With me?" suggests Cecilia, with a faint grimace that brings back all the past to him with a terrible vitality. "Then it's settled. Geoffrey, tell Captain Stairs he *must* come and have tea with us." To her intense surprise, Geoffrey, who, as a rule, is the most genial of children, refuses to say anything. He stands silent, but observant, with that queer side-long look of extreme youth directed at Stairs. Plainly he is measuring him; and hapless is the one that comes short under childhood's rule.

But Stairs is thinking only of that faint, saucy grimace of Cecilia's. He does not even notice the child's open, if silent, rudeness. Cecilia, however, rushes into the breach.

"You won't mind? You will come?"

"Mind?" There is such utter ignorance in his voice that Cecilia sees it is unnecessary to explain. Perhaps he had not heard.

"You *will* come then?"

"Thank you. Yes."

"We must hurry," cries Cecilia gaily. "They will be wondering where we are."

CHAPTER XIV.

"The bitter sweet, the honey blent with gall,
Eros and Anteros, for weal or woe,
Him the destroyer, him the saviour call."

STAIRS has followed her obediently through the wood, she showing the way, the boy with her. He hardly knows why he is going, so strong had been his determination a while ago not to accompany her anywhere.

"We are nearly there now," cries she, suddenly turning to Stairs. "I can smell the fire already; don't you? I'm sure Mickey has been putting in green leaves and branches, but it smells very lovely, doesn't it?—the lovelier for that—only I'm afraid it won't boil the kettle. Ah! Here we are!"

All at once she seems to step from the soft shady wood into a small, clear opening, where three people are to be seen, bending over something or other, the deepest anxiety depicted in all their attitudes. From between them a pale thread of smoke ascends, very reluctantly, to Heaven.

"A sacrificial fire," says Stairs, with a sort of gloomy mirth. They all indeed look as earnest, as intent, as if their lives are in question.

"They are making sacrifices, certainly," says Cecilia laughing. "How their poor eyes must suffer! I felt I

should be of no use in a case like this, so I ran a race with Geoff. I'd hate to sacrifice myself for anything."

The words are spoken gaily, jestingly, but they give Stairs pause. Is that the very truth? Had he been right after all? Is she worthless—soulless?

His eyes travel back to the fire. The three stooping over it have their faces hidden from him, but as he moves nearer he sees their figures more plainly, and places them in a sort of mirthless mirth. That big-shouldered man is the High Priest, and that slender maiden the vestal virgin and—— Good Heavens! that must be the Devil!

It is, however, only Mickey McNamara after all, with his face as black as a coal! He has raised his head on hearing the coming footsteps, and now presents a visage that would have routed a regiment of Zulus.

"Good Heavens, Mickey!" cries Cecilia.

At this the other two rise, and glance backwards towards her. Nell, seeing a man, instinctively pulls down her cuffs, and makes little soft dabs at her hair. She is slightly flushed. Cecilia, who is aghast at Mickey's appearance, stands still and points tragically at him, on which Gaveston and Nell look at him too.

"What's the matter with me?" asks Mr. McNamara, lifting his hands to his face, which plainly is the point in question—they are all staring at it. Slowly he rubs his hands over it, after which proceeding *nothing* is left to be desired.

They all burst out laughing; Geoffrey has flung himself on the grass in a very agony of mirth.

"Oh, he is dirty, isn't he?" says Nell, shaking with laughter, upon which McNamara, casting a reproachful glance at her, wheels round, and dashes towards a pool in the distance.

"Peter," says Mrs. Gaveston, advancing, "I have an old friend to introduce to you."

The big man whom Stairs had called the High Priest turns at this, and with a smile still on his face as he remembers the flying of Mickey, comes forward. Stairs colours hotly So this is her husband. This tall, ugly, kindly, *perfect* gentleman? There is no taking Gaveston at any time to be less than that, and Stairs at once acknowledges it, with a singularly painful pang.

"This is my husband," says Cecilia prettily, and with

the most buoyant smile. There is evidently no suspicion in her mind about anyone. *She* is happy, so everyone must be happy too. She has played at happiness for six long years, and has quite come to believe in it. Is there anything beyond her present life? Her delightful life in which she is so accustomed to be petted and spoiled? Has she a single trouble? *Well*—there's a debt or two to be paid to her dress-woman, to be sure, and a few ridiculous principles on Peter's part to be overcome, but beyond *that*—beyond that the waves sink and all the lake seems clear!

Gaveston has come to her at once, his clear dark eyes smiling at Cecilia's visitor.

"A friend of yours?" says he, and extends his hand to Stairs, who takes it, presses it, drops it.

A strange turn of affairs truly, he tells himself with some bitterness, when he has taken, and pressed, the hand of Cecilia's husband!

"An old friend! *such* an old one," says Cecilia vivaciously. "Nell, you remember Philip?" At this the vestal virgin comes forward.

"*Indeed* I do!" says she pleasantly, slipping her hand into Stairs' in an outburst of friendliness. "I was only a baby then and Cissy was a *child*—but we *both* remember you, don't we, Cissy?"

"Of course we do," says Cecilia delightfully. "Philip quite brings back the old days, doesn't he? What a pickle you were then, Nell."

Stairs' face has blanched. It is nothing to her then all this past—"a dream and a forgetting, no more." "It brings back old days." Stairs turns, and for once, for the first time perhaps in all his acquaintance with her, deliberately examines her. What a face! What lips—half mocking—wholly delightful—and her eyes—

"Her eyes men Beauty call,

and her brow, with those little sunny ringlets running across it—and yet with all these charms, these exquisite delights, what is she? A mere bubble on life's ocean, a thing with nothing in it, a glorious phantasy, a passing sunbeam, a woman perfect at all points so far as eye can see, yet for all that,

"Light as the foam that flecks the seas,
Fitful as summer's sunset breeze,
As transient as morning dew,
Mere waste of time."

"I remember you, too," says Stairs with an effort, turning from Cecilia and looking down into Nell's pretty face. "Six years is a long time, of course, but I remember."

Again his eyes seek Cecilia's. At this moment it seems to him that he would give his life to be able to *compel* her to feel, to remember, as he does. Cecilia laughs, and beneath the laugh—which is perfect—the faint blanching of her face goes unseen.

"I hope you will come and stay with us, when your visit with the McGregors is up," says Gaveston, in his calm, kindly tones. "Any friend of my wife's," with a tender glance at Cecilia, who nods back at him in quite a brilliant fashion, "is a friend of mine. It appears you knew her when you were both even younger,"—with an amused glance at his wife, who indeed looks a mere girl, "than you are now."

"I met Mrs. Gaveston six years ago," says Stairs briefly.

"And were tremendous chums?"

Peter laughs, and his wife laughs too, and pats him on the shoulder with quite delightful *bonhomie*. The pat drives Stairs nearly mad.

"Yes, yes, you must come," says she. "It will be lovely to renew our acquaintance. Peter is right, we *were* chums. Do you remember that last dance we were at?"—she smiles openly at Stairs—"that fancy ball given by Lady Adean? That was almost the last time I saw you before you went abroad, or was it the *very* last? I can always call it to mind, because it was my first dance; I feel a little ashamed now when I recollect how I danced that night, and wore holes in my stockings. Peter, you'd have shuddered if you had seen me! I never sat down for one moment!"

"I shouldn't," says Gaveston. "I know you. I should shudder if you *did* sit down for a moment; I should imagine you at the point of death."

"Oh! what a shame!" says Cecilia, giving him a little push that wouldn't have upset a fly.

Stairs, dumb, is watching her. Is it actual cruelty or only mere indifference? That last dance! And she—and he—and that too swift hour in the conservatory. He had not *asked* her to marry him—he had not put her to the proof, but if ever a girl knew what he meant, Cecilia knew then. He was poor, absolutely penniless but for his pay, and had nothing to offer her. But his eyes—his voice—she *must* have understood. And at the last—when he had taken her in his arms, and kissed her mouth—the mouth had been upheld to him, and sweetly willing. A childish mouth, indeed, yet not so childish but that its lovely owner must have known the passionate love he bore her.

It all comes back—the soft silence of the night, the faint dropping of the fountain, the distant snatches of the waltz in the ball-room that seemed so far away. The girl standing with her hand fast locked in his. His desperate, honourable determination not to bind her—not to speak. He had kissed her, once, that seemed speech enough, if she would be true; and he had believed she would be that. She knew, he felt she knew, how much he loved her, and she would wait, and soon he would come back covered with glory, and they—they two—What a boy's dream it all was!

He had come back to find all things forgotten, and Cecilia—married.

These thoughts pass in a second; he comes back to the present moment, to the sound of her voice.

"You mustn't mind Peter," Cecilia is saying gaily. "And you must come and stay with us."

"I am afraid——" begins Stairs coldly.

"I really hope you will," says Gaveston hospitably, whose star is hardly in the ascendant at this moment; the Fates, urging him on to this invitation, are playing him a sorry game. "I hear you have no very immediate friends to demand your time. Cecilia has been telling me about you. So I hope you will spare us a little of it."

Stairs hesitates. This man, so kind, so trusting, so ignorant! No, he will not accept his—— And yet why not? *She* cares nothing—and to be near her, to see her every day!

"Thank you," says he, "you are very kind. I shall be delighted."

"Then you will be in time for *another* fancy ball," says Nell, "because Cecilia——"

Here Mr. McNamara, very rosy about the face and ears, and with a generally scrubbed appearance, makes his reappearance.

"There's somebody 'comin' through the rye,'" says he, pointing through the trees to a field beyond.

"So there is; who can it be?" says Nell.

"Why, it's Sir Stephen!" cries Cecilia. "Tell him to come and have tea with us."

Mr. McNamara, snatching up a cup, rushes forward.

CHAPTER XV.

"Yet weep I not for human misery,
Nor for the stars' complaining,
Nor for the river's wailing.
I weep for thee alone most miserly,
Keep all my tears for thee."

"Hi!" roars he to a tall young man, who has come out of the field, and is now striding through the bracken, with his gun on his shoulder.

The tall young man stops, and looks enquiringly in his direction, whereupon McNamara, waving the cup on high, yells to him:

"I say, Wortley!"

"What?" roars back Sir Stephen, who, on account of the dip in the ground where he is standing, can see McNamara only.

"'Lads and lasses, come to tay—come to tay,'" sings Mickey at the top of his extraordinary lungs.

Sir Stephen, who naturally thinks he has gone mad, shouts back:

"What the deuce are you at?"

At this juncture, Nell most providentially appears upon the scene, another cup in her hand, which she also waves to the rabbitier down below.

"I really think, Mickey, you might spare us your Irish *sometimes*," says she pettishly, to McNamara, who indignantly repudiates the accusation.

"Irish, indeed! I was only making up the poetry. If I had said, 'Lads and lasses, come *away*,' he'd have gone round the corner; but when I said '*tay*' he understood."

"Did he?" contemptuously.

"Of course he did. He's coming—I suppose," wrathfully, and growing very mixed, because of his anger, "*you* thought I called *tay* tea."

"No," says Nell, giving way to wild mirth. "I thought you called tea *tay*!"

"Look here," says Mickey, "I'll strangle you some day." He, however, is also shouting with laughter by the time Sir Stephen joins them.

"Such a blessing you have come," says Nell, giving him her hand, and a delightful smile, "Mickey was just going to strangle me."

"Well, I thought he looked a little mad," says Sir Stephen. "I'm thankful I'm in time. Put down that murderous weapon, McNamara," pointing to the cup, "and explain yourself."

"I'm bad at that," says Mickey, "but Mrs. Gaveston is having a gipsy tea over there, and she wants to know if you'll join us."

"How nicely you said that, just like one of those etiquette books, that tell you how to address your superiors," says Nell, with a faint little grimace, which, I regret to say, Mr. McNamara lavishly responds to behind Sir Stephen's back. "Sir Stephen, aren't you tired of the rabbits? I am sure the rabbits are very tired of you. Do let them alone for a little while, and come and talk to Cecilia."

"Does that mean that I mustn't talk to you?" asks Sir Stephen, who is really looking almost handsome in his present get-up.

Nell lowers her eyes, and furrows her brows as if thinking.

"I'm so busy, you see," says she demurely. "I'm looking after the tea. But you've come in excellent time for that, as the fire has refused to light."

The fire, however, is now a glorious thing as they approach. It is blazing high, and the kettle, that, oft-times, most obstinate thing in the world, is singing with all the fervour of an assured prima donna.

"Oh, Sir Stephen, here you are!" says Cecilia, going

to him. "We have had such a tussle with the fire, but now I really *do* think it is going to behave itself. One would think an evil eye had been thrown on it until now."

"It must be Captain Stairs'," says Nell laughing. "He is new; an unknown quantity; therefore how can we trust him?"

"It is madness to take anyone on trust," says Stairs smiling. He is thinking of Cecilia, however.

"We'll take you anyway," says Mickey. "Your eye seems to be a most respectable one, if it has had anything to do with *this* fire."

Indeed, the kettle is at last boiling, and after a desperate struggle with the teapot, to which it appears to be hopelessly antagonistic, and a snort of rage that only itself could produce, is persuaded to pour itself into the triumphant pot, after which the lid of the latter closes with a disgracefully jubilant sound, and peace is restored—though without much honour on either side, it must be acknowledged.

"We were just talking about our fancy ball," says Nell presently. Then, to Wortley, "Cecilia is going to have one next month. What will *you* be?"

"Perhaps I shan't be asked," says Sir Stephen.

"Nonsense! That's getting out of it. *I* know what you ought to be."

"Do you? What then?"

"I'd be afraid to tell you."

There is so little fear in the small face looking down at him—Sir Stephen is stretched at her feet—that the latter laughs aloud.

"You can't think how interesting you are," says he. "It's so nice to know that someone is afraid of one. It quite sets one up. But what have I done to you, that you should commend to my notice such a costume as that?"

"As what?" asks she, glancing at him from under her long lashes.

"As the one you have in your mind. Of course, I shall follow your advice; and perhaps the cheapest way to manage it would be to write to Mr. Irving. He must have a considerable number of those costumes tucked away somewhere."

"Is it Greek?" asks Nell, with a puzzled air. Her audacity is enchanting. Sir Stephen laughs again.

"No; it's melancholy English. Melancholy for *me*, at all events; proving your opinion of me. But tell me—shall I send to the Lyceum for some of those cast-off garments that splendid Mephistopheles used to wear?"

"Oh! is it *that* you have in your mind?" cries she disdainfully. "As if," with another little glance, "they would fit you. He, so tall and slender, you so tall and——"

"Broad?"

"I wasn't going to say that," says Nell frowning. "But"—as if suddenly becoming aware of something—"you *are* the biggest man I ever saw."

"Is that an insult or a compliment? Perhaps I had better pass it over. You call me a giant then?"

"I don't call you anything," says Nell.

"You do, however. 'Sir Stephen,' sometimes."

"I meant that I didn't call you *names*."

"I'm not so sure of that." He edges towards her across the grass, and helps himself to a bit of plum cake. Tea is in high swing by this time. "You've called me a 'giant'! And to call anybody anything is actionable now-a-days. Well, am I to go as 'Anak' then, if not as Mephistopheles?"

"Ah! That's trying to find out," says she. "I wasn't thinking of either Anak or that other unpleasant person when I first spoke."

"Weren't you?" says Mr. McNamara, breaking into the conversation with a sigh of relief. "What a comfort! The infant phenomenon is always such a nuisance! When I first spoke, I——"

"Oh, spare us, Mickey," cries Cecilia.

"I wasn't going to say anything unpleasant," says McNamara reproachfully. "I was only going to reveal an old legend in the family. My mother and my old nurse, who was quite famed in Donegal for her knowledge of the unseen—who might, indeed, at this moment be a celebrated member of the Psychical Research Society——"

"Where is she?" interrupts Cecilia anxiously. "Why don't you bring her over? She might make her fortune, now Madame Blavatsky is gone."

"For one trifling reason. That she is gone too," says McNamara mournfully. "She died when I was two years old, and my mother always said a great woman had been lost to the world. Especially the infant world. Anyhow, she had great hopes of me upon my first utterance."

"And what was that?" eagerly.

"Really I hardly like to tell." McNamara looks modestly down into his cup.

"Oh, go on, Mickey."

"Well—it was 'Boh'!"

"Oh, go to the deuce," says Sir Stephen, forgetting himself in the heat and disappointment of the moment.

"I thought you said your old nurse knew something about the unseen—was quite a Mahatma sort of person?" says Cecilia, who never troubles herself to know anything about anything, and is quite content with smatterings.

"She never wore a hat that I heard of," says Mickey sadly. "She only wore a cap, that, as a child, I thought was a helmet, and she knew a lot about the unseen, so you needn't abuse the poor old thing. The dead are sacred, you know. Only she called the unseen 'The good people,' and when I said 'Boh' as my first word, she told my mother it was the most remarkable instance of childish intelligence she had ever heard of. And that by reason of that one word, I should always be able to have the good people under my thumb. She said I was to be a leader of men, and that the 'good people' would obey me, and that I should marry a 'lovely lady.'" He pauses, and casts a thoughtful glance at Nell. "That's you, I suppose," says he.

"I'm sure it isn't then," says Nell heartily. "Your 'good people' have made a mistake there." She turns her back upon him, and gives her attention once more to Wortley.

"After all, you haven't guessed what I think you ought to be."

"I shall, *perhaps*."

"Oh! *perhaps*."

"You won't tell me then?"

"No!" shaking her charming head.

"Very good. I shall appear at your sister's dance in the dress you have—designed for me."

"You *couldn't* guess it," says she laughing.

"I'll try."

"What shall *I* go as?" asks Mr. McNamara generally, who, having eaten all the plum cake, is now, as he would himself have expressed it, "topping up" with the sponge. "I lie awake o' nights dwelling on it."

"My dear Mickey, what a woeful waste of time," says Nell. "Is there a question about it? Why, you rehearsed the part, publicly, only ten minutes ago."

"Oh, of course," cries Cecilia, breaking into merry laughter. "A sweep, Mickey—a sweep you'll have to be."

"Oh, yes, Mickey. It will be delightful. The very thing for you!" declares Nell enthusiastically. "You could carry it off so well."

Mr. McNamara fixes a baleful eye first on Cecilia, then on Nell, but answer makes he none! At last he turns to Peter.

"Rude! very rude *I* call it," says he.

"Rude?" cries Nell. "What a misconception of the whole thing. Why, we want you to be original, that first and greatest thing. Many would shrink from the part, but you—with your bold spirit! You will make a sensation—create a part. What can you desire more? And besides all that, you have *rehearsed* it—a chance given to few of us—you have *seen* yourself in the pool over there, and——"

"Like Narcissus, thought myself a beauty," says McNamara promptly. "I did not, however, throw myself in. I knew," pensively, "that though I *was* a beauty, I wasn't a nymph!"

"That was awfully smart of you," says Wortley.

Here Cecilia, who has been talking to Stairs, turns to them, with faintly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"*Still* arranging your costumes? Ah! you shouldn't tell."

"That's what *I* say," says Nell.

"Yet you have been endeavouring to dress me for the past half-hour," says Wortley.

"My dear Miss Prendergast!" says McNamara, *sotto voce*, in the exact voice of Mrs. Cutforth-Boss.

"I shan't tell what *I'm* going to be till I have to," says Mrs. Gaveston. "And you, Peter—I forbid you to tell either."

"A royal command," says Gaveston in his quiet way.

"I've got my commands," says Mickey, turning to Cecilia. "They don't *sound* very royal. And I only hope when I appear in your rooms you will put the blame in the right quarter."

"Why? What is it? What does he mean?" says Cecilia, a little absently. "No, no *sweeps*, Mickey! Are you really going, Philip? Well, good-bye, and remember you are promised to me after your visit to the McGregors."

"I never forget," says Stairs, smiling.

He bids them all good-bye, amidst the happy confusion of their packing up, and disappears through the trees.

His departure, even to himself, seems a little abrupt. And he hardly knew why he went. Cecilia, for the past five minutes, had given herself up to him solely. She had been charming, delightful—*friendly*.

Perhaps that was why he went.

"Do you know," says Nell, addressing everyone generally, when he is well out of sight, "I think he is very nice indeed. I *do*, although certainly he is depressing. But, poor fellow, he was invalided home, and no doubt is still very ill."

"Decent fellow enough, in my opinion," says Mickey.

"I think," remarks Wortley, looking at Nell, "you sounded the central note when you said 'depressing.'"

"He seems a good fellow for all that," returns Gaveston kindly.

All seems moving smoothly in Stairs' favour, when suddenly a small and most unexpected voice breaks in, and checks the current.

"He's a nasty, rude man," says Geoffrey, with decision.

"Oh, Geoffrey!" cries his mother. She looks at the boy in a strange way and laughs—a rather uncertain laugh. "What has he done to *you*?" asks she.

"He pushed me away from him," says Geoffrey indignantly.

"What a scoundrell!" exclaims his father, laughing. "Deserves killing, in my opinion. What shall we do with him, Geoffrey? Hang, draw, and quarter him?"

"I don't like him," says the boy conclusively.

"That," Wortley laughs, "seems to make an end of it."

"An end of all things," says Gaveston, laughing too; "even of this afternoon. I suppose we must go home, Cecilia?"

"I suppose so," Cecilia assents absently. Her eyes are fixed on her little son. What had happened before she came up?

A cloud has settled on her brow, a brow, as a rule, so cloudless! and Nell seeing it, wonders. Cecilia dull—unhappy. It seems impossible. Then, all at once she remembers something. What Cecilia had told her a little time ago, about those horrid bills, and her dislike to tell Peter about them. Though how *anyone* could be afraid to tell Peter *anything*—that seems so extraordinary. Well, here is a chance of getting poor old Cissy out of her dumps. Fancy her being unhappy for a few pounds or so when *she*, Nell, can give them to her.

She is standing next a young oak-tree—a lissome, pretty thing—a sort of replica of herself, and, as though acknowledging it as a brother, she winds her arm round it, and looks quietly towards Wortley.

"Sir Stephen!" cries she, and Wortley, breaking off a conversation with Gaveston with rather undue haste, comes to her.

"Will you be very busy to-morrow?" asks she quietly.

"Busy to-morrow? No."

He looks at her as if a little surprised, and she looks back at him with the most serene smile in the world.

"That's right," says she. "Because I want to see you."

Sir Stephen suppresses a still further flow of surprise, and says:

"Yes?" interrogatively.

"You know that little strand"—she was going to say "where first I saw you," but the memory of those horrid shoes and stockings checks her. No, not *that* strand, anyway. "That little strand called Dead Man's Cave?"

"It is hard to forget," says Wortley. "The ghastly clings to us."

"Well, I want to speak to you—and alone!" She nods here most mysteriously at him. "You won't say

a word, will you? and you'll be there to-morrow at three. That's the hour when I can best escape. And I *must* see you."

What an invitation!

"I'll be there certainly," says Wortley, looking at her. She receives his glance most kindly, and leaning towards him says:

"Not a word to *anyone*, mind! you promise? Not"—her pretty finger to her lips—"a word!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"I would do as I pleased, and doing what I pleased, I should have my will, and having my will, I should be contented."

THE little yellow sea-pansies are opening wide, and spreading themselves all abroad, beneath the sun's rays. The sea lies calm as death. Round the corner, looking eastward from this tiny cave, two or three yachts are lying at anchor in the harbour, scarcely stirring, save for the lazy dipping of them, as they rise and fall, making their salutations to the water.

To-day—that kind and "liberal worldling" is *en fête*. Such a blue sky overhead, and such a splendid gathering of colours under foot. The gray sands dazzling with all the bright delights of the rainbow—now shining softly like the opal, now sparkling like the polished diamond—and there, in the light soil the pansies, and the delicate asparagus, and the stiff mesembryanthemums. And here—on the shore itself, the pale grey bleaching of the bones of the dead sea-birds.

The day is heavenly sweet. And still—so still!

"The radiant summer with her azure eyes,
And flower-crowned head,"

is full upon us, and down here in this quaint spot, hidden from the world, the sweetness of it is intense.

Nell, who had "escaped," as she called it, earlier even than she hoped for—Geoffrey having gone for a ride with his father, has thrown herself happily upon the

sand, and supported by a big boulder behind her, gives herself up to the hour, and the peace of it!

She is feeling singularly happy, which adds to her enjoyment. Poor, darling old Ciss. She shall know very soon that the two hundred pounds she—though, why on earth couldn't she have asked Peter for it?

She laughs aloud as she dwells on Cecilia's cowardice. Fancy her, Nell, being afraid of anyone. . . . She won't be afraid of Sir Stephen, certainly, when he arrives, which will be in about twenty minutes.

The afternoon grows in beauty! Afar—over there—the yachts—that now have loosed their moorings and are going out to sea, are shining like huge sea-gulls against the pale clear sky. There is no sound anywhere save the stir of the sea in the sunlight, and presently the girl, giving into the charm of it all, sinks backwards, not asleep, yet hardly awake, and lazy—oh, so lazy!

Wortley, who had thought to be the first at this strange tryst, descending the bank that leads to this little beach, stops suddenly.

There she is before him. Lying in the shadow, with her back against a rock and her hands linked behind her head, and her pretty feet stretched out, this time in the most irreproachable—the most extravagant—of shoes and stockings.

Her eyes are turned seaward, and her whole air is so full of the idleness of the lazy joy of the warm hour, that she does not hear him until he is close to her—until indeed he is standing over her—looking down.

"Oh, you've come," cries she. She laughs and springs to her feet. "In good time! I hardly expected you for another ten minutes, and do you know, I was nearly asleep."

"The day is warm," says Wortley, as though hardly knowing what he says. The girl standing there in her blue frock is so beautiful, with those dark, drowsy eyes, that speak of slumber still, and her lips half parted, and around her all the silence, the calm of this wonderful pink afternoon. Not a sound anywhere except:

"The soft sweep of the breathless bay."

"It is delightful," says Nell. "Why can't it be summer always? I hate winter with its frosts and its general

dulness. To-day, now *look at to-day!*" She flings out her slender arms towards the sea and sky as if in happy laudation of their charms. And Wortley tells himself that they might well send back a great hymn of praise to *her*. Is she not as beautiful as they? Nay, is she not one with them, part of them, as all beauty is one of a great whole—blending, mingling for ever?

He had felt the day almost oppressive as he came down, but now it seems perfect. Just warm enough, but not too warm; without a want anywhere. It seems to him that she—this pretty creature—has created this blessed change. Even her frock seems to have something to do with it—that pale blue cambric; so blue, so comforting—surely it helps to calm, to tone, as it were, this maddening sun.

"Come under this rock," says Nell, "the heat out there is dreadful." There is not the faintest suspicion of confusion in either her face or manner. She seems only unfeignedly glad to see him, and beckons him into her shelter under the sloping rock, with the very friendliest air.

Wortley, having propped himself against the comparative coolness of the rock, she gives him her huge white umbrella to hold over both of them; an umbrella elaborately trimmed with most expensive lace.

"Aren't you longing to know why I wanted to see you?" asks Miss Prendergast gaily, when she has settled herself into a comfortable position on one of the ledges.

Wortley looks at her—at the delicate little face and clear eyes, and smiling, rather mutinous mouth. To anyone else in the wide world an answer to this leading question would be easy—but to her—the clear eyes forbid it.

"I confess to a touch of curiosity," says he, smiling in turn.

"Well, I *had* to see you really—and *alone*. It would never have done to let Cecilia know about it."

"No? Yet your sister doesn't look like the orthodox dragon."

"Oh, poor darling, *No!*" She makes this defence of Cecilia with quite a huge capital. "But you see if she had been told she would never have let me meet *you*."

The emphasis is strong. Wortley begins to feel like a first-class misdemeanant.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Gaveston has a very poor opinion of me," says he. At which Nell first stares, and then catching it, breaks into merry laughter.

"Oh, you're all wrong," says she. "It isn't that at all! Why, do you know she holds you up to me morning, noon and night, as a perfect specimen of mankind? But," with a little saucy *moue*, "I daresay she is wrong there too. I see through her. She only wants me to behave prettily to you, because you are in a sense my guardian."

It occurs to Wortley that perhaps Cecilia would hardly think she was behaving herself just now. Here alone on this isolated strand.

It seems, however, to smooth matters a little when he remembers what an immaculate person Mrs. Gaveston has made him out.

"If even in a sense your guardian," says he, "I think I ought to know what is your trouble at this moment. A trouble you cannot even tell to your sister——"

"Oh, Cissy! least of all," says Miss Prendergast. Her smile has died now, she looks a little anxious—a little eager. Wortley looks at her—uncertain—strange.

"I suppose there is something I am to do for you," says he quietly. There is calm question in his eyes.

"There is. There is indeed," says the girl eagerly. "I want——" she pauses and looks at him with all her heart in her eyes.

"You want?"

"Money," says Nell with a little jerk.

"Again?" says Wortley, smiling. "What an extravagant child. Why, it is only two months ago, just before you came here, that you drew a cheque for one hundred pounds."

"I know," says Nell airily, "and it's gone. I don't know where really—but it's gone. There is so little in a hundred pounds, isn't there?" says she, who, until six months ago had never felt more than five pounds in her pocket at a time, and that only very occasionally.

"That made two hundred out of the three your aunt settled yearly on you," says Wortley in a quiet sort of way.

"It seems dreadfully impossible, of course, but——"

"Oh, no, not a *bit* impossible," quickly. "I've been very

extravagant, I'm afraid, but—I'm going to be better after this. And—and what I want now is *more* than that even."

"More than a hundred pounds?"

"Yes, more!" Sir Stephen grows thoughtful. This child—this baby—what *can* she want with so much money?

"You have gone into it, I suppose," says he. "You understand, don't you?"—he is becoming quite pathetic—"that you have only three hundred pounds a year, and that you have already spent two hundred pounds, and there are yet six months before——"

"I know—I know—" lightly. She gets under the umbrella which he has rather tilted to one side, and so brings herself nearer to him. "But what does that matter? What I want to tell you is, that if I can't have two hundred pounds at *once*, I shall be the most wretched person on earth. You wouldn't," smiling at him dismally—such a lovely smile, "like me to be *that*——"

"Am I to understand," says Wortley suddenly, "that you——?"

"Yes, of course. I want two hundred pounds. There *must* be a way of getting it."

"There is a way, certainly," says Wortley slowly. "But it is impracticable."

"Impracticable!"

"I am afraid so." Sir Stephen's face has grown very grave. "What you want me to do is, I suppose, to advance you this two hundred pounds out of your capital?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

"I am sorry to say that cannot be done," slowly. "It's quite impossible."

"Impossible." The girl turns on him, a new angry light in her eyes. "*What* is impossible?"

"It is impossible that I can sanction your breaking into your capital."

"You mean you will not help me?"

"I cannot help you to do away with your money."

"If it is my money"—her eyes are brilliant now, her lips pale—"I suppose I can do what I like with it?"

"Why do you look at it like that?" says he gently. "Surely you must know how it is—that I would gladly do all I could for you, but your money—it is a trust. I have given my word—I——"

"Oh, don't trouble yourself to make excuses," says the girl impatiently. "I don't want excuses. I wanted you to *help* me, but it seems you won't do that."

"How can you say I won't? The truth is, I cannot; you know I gave my word to your aunt."

"I don't know why you did. I don't know what you had to do with me at all. You had never seen me—you knew nothing of me. I think," with ill-suppressed anger, "it was a very *extraordinary* thing of you, to say the least of it, to elect yourself my guardian."

"If I had done so, I should quite agree with you. I should even go farther and call it"—with a glance at her, that shows her he has read her thoughts and is supplying the words she would have used—"a very impertinent thing for me to do."

"Still you allowed yourself to be elected," says she, flushing a little, and growing the more angry because of his intuition. "What I cannot understand is, why my aunt made you my guardian. "You," throwing up her head with open and distinct hostility in voice and eye, "are nothing to me—nothing at all—*less* than nothing."

Sir Stephen laughs, a little grimly, however.

"You need not be so emphatic," says he, "there is no need to stamp it on my mind. I know it. I am nothing to you, and on the whole I was very little to your aunt. Merely the son of an old friend. She took some conceit . . . some unfounded fancy to me and sent for me on her death-bed, and implored me to do this thing."

He pauses. It comes to him now again, the remembrance of that dying bed with its aged occupant, and the light and airy fashion in which he had consented out of pure kindness to do what she desired of him. Good Heavens! what a benighted fool he had been. The poor old lady could hardly have known what a burden she was laying upon him, so he absolves her from blame, but he, himself—might have given a thought to himself! Absolution is not for him truly. He had pitied her, and she had been a dear friend of his mother's, but even her respect and gratitude could not make up for the unutterable discomfort of the situation.

He hardly himself understood why Mrs. Sinclair had made him her trustee; there was always Gaveston; but

the fact was that the old lady had heard of Cecilia's marriage some years before—had heard that this frivolous niece, Nell's sister, had married an old man for his money; she was unfortunately a romantic old lady, and "for his money" sounded like heresy in her ears. She had at once decided that Gaveston was ninety!

She herself was seventy, and did not consider that so very much *on!* No one could call *her* old. She, who could run up and down stairs like a girl, and be up at six in the morning, to rout the maids out of their lazy slumbers, and who could darn a table-cloth without glasses, and weed a bed with the best of them—*she*, thank God, was not ninety.

She had never seen Cecilia—"Cecilia the Frivoller," as she called her, being always well up to date—but she had decided upon her for all that. She was worldly, despicable, and she had married a doddering idiot who could not possibly be trusted to look after her, or anything.

Certainly not after Nell, who was very inclined to be flighty, too! The old lady had the lowest opinion of both her nieces, having cordially disliked their mother. And even if "old Gaveston" *were* capable of doing anything, still—she always called him "old Gaveston," though she had seen as little of him as of Cecilia—an old man like that could not live long. And it would take some one very much alive to check Nell.

She had been told at various times that Peter Gaveston was still, comparatively speaking, young. Not as young as his wife, of course, but certainly in the prime of life, but she always forgot when the letters were gone, and reverted to her first impression; and indeed she sank gradually into her grave believing that he, had he been honest, would have gone there before her; but he had defied Nature, and bad would come of it. She heartily despised Peter as the end came.

"How could I refuse her?" says Wortley, after a moment or two. "She was dying, she implored me. It seemed a simple thing then. And you must remember I didn't then know——" he hesitates.

"Me?" asks Nell defiantly.

"Well," slowly, "yes."

"Perhaps," says she, her voice now vibrating with

some undefinable feeling. "You think you know me now?"

"Give me some credit," says Wortley with a peculiar smile.

"You *don't*, any way," says Nell.

She is by this time seriously offended; one knowing her could see it by the droop of the lids over the brilliant eyes.

"You don't *half* know me! And I think the hour will come when you will wish you didn't know me, *at all!*"

There is something almost threatening in her attitude as she says this; and her lips look as though they would have said:

"I am going to lead you *such* a life!"

"Possibly," says Wortley calmly. "Of course I can see how annoyed you must be about all this. I have been put over Gaveston's head for one thing, and——"

"You have been put over *my* head—that is a great deal worse," says Nell, passionately. She has forgotten now all about that first wilful determination to bring him to her feet, and to punish him for that terrible day when she had been discovered by him shoeless and stockingless. She is forgetful now indeed of everything, but his hateful refusal to help her to help Cecilia. Anger burns within her impulsive breast, and hatred, towards him—The Tyrant! She has already clothed him in big capitals. "I can't think *why* that dreadful old woman did it, except to annoy me."

"I am sure she thought she was doing what was best for you. You are very young. And she was old, and a little eccentric, and——"

"Eccentric?" she glances up quickly. "If she were eccentric, why can't her will be changed?"

"Perhaps it might be. But you forget"—Sir Stephen smiles involuntarily—"if it were to be disputed, you would, in all probability, find yourself without the money in question."

"And without you too," says Nell, quickly, impulsively. A moment later, she is honestly ashamed of her words, but without the desire to withdraw them. There is a dead silence, that lasts for nearly a minute; she breaks it uncomfortably.

"It ought to have been Peter."

"Nobody could possibly wish more heartily than I do, that it had been Gaveston," says Sir Stephen deliberately, whose temper, not a perfect one at any time, is now beginning to fail him.

"It isn't half as bad for you, as it is for me," says Nell, flashing an angry glance at him.

"There you must allow me to differ with you."

"At all events there is one comfort," says Miss Prendergast, taking her knees into her embrace, and looking steadily at the calm and shining sea. "I shall soon be twenty-one, and then——"

"You will be able to make ducks and drakes of your money as quickly as you like."

"I wasn't going to say that," indignantly. "I was going to say that then you would be mercifully delivered from me."

She smiles, a rather imperfect smile, that has something of scorn in it.

"True," returns Wortley.

I suppose, in her vanity, she had expected something more than this polite agreement with her own words. At all events there is a certain haste about the manner in which she rises and prepares to go homewards.

"Good-bye," says she, holding out a very limp little hand.

"May I not," indifferently, "see you home?"

"No. Oh, no, thank you," with exaggerated civility. "It is very good of you to suggest it, but I am going to see an old woman on my way, so I will not trouble you." She moves on a step or two, and then all at once the hateful idea of having to go home, and confess to Cecilia that she has *failed*, that she will not be able to help her—and all because she could not subdue Sir Stephen—because she was unable to make him do her bidding, cuts sore into her heart. Why, she had almost *boasted* to Cecilia that she could have her own way with him, at any time, for any object!

Humiliation lies before her. Even Cecilia's need lies prostrate before this crush to her vanity.

She turns and looks back at Wortley—to his horror, he sees that her eyes are full of tears.

"Is it *quite* impossible then?" says she.

"In *that* way," says he hurriedly.

"You speak," eagerly, and coming a little nearer to him, "you mean," her colour rising, and dyeing most sweetly her young and charming face, "that there may be *another* way?"

Wortley hesitates. Of course—of course she does not understand, but the moment is bitter. Is there after all a grain of truth in all the hard things that have been said for generations about the Prendergasts? Does *she* inherit—?

"I could procure it for you," slowly.

"Procure it? You mean—?"

"I could lend it to you," says he distinctly.

He does not look at her as he says this, but when no answer comes, he turns his eyes on hers.

Her face is quite changed. It was angry a moment ago, with the petulant anger of an unreasonable child; but now it is cold and set. The eyes are shining, but the lips are firmly set. She looks as though she wants words, but cannot find them, and even after Wortley's eyes break the spell, and speech comes to her, still ideas fail her.

"*Sir Stephen!*" mutters she in a choking tone, and turning, goes swiftly, with head high upheld, away from him.

It is perhaps the most distinct snub Sir Stephen has ever had in his life, yet, strange to say, it leaves no sting behind. Rather a deep sense of relief, of satisfaction. What is this troublesome child to him, that her notions of right and wrong, honour, and feminine delicacy of feeling, should trouble him? It is impossible to account for it, but it is with a light heart and step, he too goes homeward.

CHAPTER XVII.

"So well she's masked under this fair pretence,
An infidel would swear she's made of perfect innocence."

"**WHERE** *have* you been, Nell?" says Cecilia in a fretful tone. She is lying on a lounge in her boudoir with her head buried in pillows, and a pale blue silk hand-

kerchief. Pale blue, if you can't get green, is the best thing for making one look ill.

"Is your head hurting you?" asks Nell, advancing anxiously, but noiselessly.

"Oh yes—of course. It is always aching, I think. And I had another letter from that horrid frock woman to-day; she says she *must* have that money. Fancy! A paltry two hundred pounds, and to be so disagreeable, too, considering all I have spent with her. I don't know what I shall do, I'm sure. I suppose I'll *have* to tell Peter."

"I can't think why you hesitate," says Nell hastily; seeing Cecilia so prostrate, so evidently overcome, a second wave of wrath against Sir Stephen rises within her breast. It is impossible to let things go without telling Cecilia that at all events she has done her best for her. That she has tried her hardest to give her some of her money—and failed. Failure spells chagrin, and it is with a distinct feeling of humiliation that she makes up her mind to tell Cecilia "all about it."

"I can't think myself," says Cecilia.

"Peter is so good," puts in Nell, with a view to shaking off the evil moment of confession as long as possible.

"Ah! that is just it! I really think he is perfect," says Peter's wife, rising on her elbow and growing positively emphatic, "that is what makes him so impossible. If I could find a fault in Peter, I believe I should *love* him better than I do. But—— Do you know, Nell," she pauses: with an impulsive gesture, flings the blue silk kerchief off her head, and then, as if recollecting herself, throws it on again with a swift glance at the door. To Nell watching her, a vague, half-sickening feeling comes; is Cecilia altogether real? Has she been posing? *Making herself up* for some occasion? Cecilia's pale face, and feverish air reproach her, for these thoughts. Even if posing, she is certainly suffering.

"Do you know," Cecilia is saying, "that—it's ridiculous, of course—but I'm a little bit afraid of Peter."

"Of Peter?"

"Not of *him*, you know, but of what he's *thinking*; I have a fancy that he thinks a great deal—a great deal that he never *says*."

"Why, that is the way with everybody."

"With everybody? Yes, perhaps—but I tell you this, Nell, if ever Peter is *driven* to say any unpleasant thought of his, there will be bad work all round. It is the quiet people who are always so dreadful in the long run; like the Genii, they are bottled up all their lives, and when some unforeseen circumstance sets them free, they upset the whole apple-cart."

"Let us hope circumstances will stand to us," says Nell, "and keep the cork *well* in; in the meantime, I insist on saying you are slandering Peter."

"Well, you'll see."

"I'm sure I hope I shan't," says Nell, at which they both laugh, Cecilia somewhat frugally.

"Of course I know perfectly well," says she, twisting gracefully round, and commencing a tattoo upon the ivory table near her, "that he would do anything on earth for me—*anything*. I am certain if I told him now about this wretched bill," pettishly thrusting from her a letter lying in the folds of her white gown, "he would not say one cross word to me, but he would think about it! He would think me extravagant."

"Well, so you are," says Nell bluntly. "But one wouldn't mind one's husband thinking *that*!"

It would seem from this speech that there is quite a gay old time awaiting Miss Prendergast's husband.

"One would, if one's husband was Peter. Besides, he wouldn't use the word 'extravagant,' it would be 'dishonest' with him. He used it that last time—so sweetly, so *kindly*, you will understand, but I haven't forgotten it."

"One would think you had," says Nell, and then catches her breath.

Her sister stares at her. If Nell had feared her anger from this rather sarcastic little speech, she finds herself mistaken.

"Don't cultivate that sort of thing," says Cecilia earnestly. "You'll *never* get married if you do! There isn't a soul on earth to whom irony, when directed against *itself*, isn't abhorrent. Even your good looks won't pull you through, if you persist in it. And as old maids are a blot on creation, I hear they are going to bring in a bill to shoot them!"

At this pleasantry they both laugh, Neil the more eagerly in that she is glad to escape with so small a scolding, though to do Cecilia justice scolding is always far from her. Perhaps, being so incessantly in need of it herself, she has a fellow feeling for other delinquents.

"Nell," says she suddenly, feeling a sort of increased *camaraderie* towards Nell, because of this incidental spurt of laughter. "I'll tell you something," she pulls the girl towards her. "It is a secret, mind! It has never passed my lips before. But——" she breaks off, "you will never so much as think of it again?"

"Never!"

"Well, then, the fact is—I was never in *love* with Peter. Not actually in *love*. See? I'm *fond* of him, you know, specially since Gooffrey came—but . . . it was a hurried thing, and mother . . . you remember, don't you?—it used to be *all* mother and not a *bit* of us girls. And—well—I don't regret it, you know, only—And as you say, he is so good. And I'm quite happy with him, quite. You mustn't run away with things, you know."

She pauses.

"No, no." Nell is looking rather pale.

"I'm coming to the funny part of it," says Cecilia, leaning back and laughing an airy, very *joyless* laugh. "What I want to tell you is that, though I'm not exactly in love with Peter, I want him to respect me! There—it's out. I—you're laughing, aren't you?"—with another very nervous laugh of her own—"It isn't a bit *like* me, is it? But I confess I value his respect more than anything in the world. That"—naïvely—"is why I am so afraid of him."

She ceases, but Nell says nothing.

"Come!" says Cecilia, sitting up on her couch, and making a faint grimace at her sister. "You never thought I was born to respect anything in Heaven or on earth, did you?"

"Why not?" asks Nell. There is some pain in her voice. "You know right well what I think of you."

"Do I?" She flings herself back amongst her cushions. "I don't then. I don't believe I know what anyone thinks of me, and sometimes"—with a reckless upward movement of her head—"I don't care what they think."

"You have a headache, you are unnerved." Nell bends tenderly over her. "It is this horrid bill. Tell Peter!"

"No," says Cecilia, with sudden determination. "I shall not do that." She rises to her feet, and flings the blue scarf from her on to the floor. "I thought I could do it. I wound my head up in that handkerchief to make myself look ill before him to enlist his sympathy; he's wretched when I'm ill. . . . All a pretence, you see, Nell, all a pretence! I'm only a drifting bit of froth upon the ocean of life—a bubble, a fraud. But I'll pretend no more to-day. And I shan't tell Peter—I haven't the courage. Come, let us talk of something else. Where were you this morning?"

"I can't bear to tell you."

"Why?" Cecilia regards her with astonishment.

"I met Sir Stephen down on Deadman's Beach, and I asked him to let me have this two hundred pounds you want so badly, and——"

"You didn't mention *me*?" colouring hotly.

"No, of course not."

"Well"—anxiously—"well?"

"He said he could not let me encroach upon my principal, or my capital, or something like that. I felt so *mad*." Tears rise to her eyes. "I said all I could, I even—entreated. But, wasn't it"—choking—"horrid of him?"

"*Beast!*" says Cecilia, briefly, but forcibly.

"So you see I can't be of any use to you," says Nell, sorrowfully.

"Nonsense, you're the joy of my life," says Cecilia laughing. "And I'm only sorry you had such a bad time with Sir Stephen, especially," with a sharp sigh, "as no good came of it."

"But what will you do now? You will have to tell Peter."

"I couldn't," says Cecilia, dismally.

No one had heard the door open.

"What can't you tell me?" asks Gaveston, standing on the threshold, and looking in a rather questioning way at his wife.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge."

"Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it."

"So many things that I hardly know where to begin," says Cecilia, so lightly, so airily, so entirely without an *arrière pensée* of any kind, and with such a radiant, brilliant smile, that Nell's heart stands still. And then, all in a moment, the girl goes forward straight to Peter, and quickly, sharply, yet tenderly, tells the whole story to him. She never knew *how* she did it, or even quite *why* she did it—but now it is done, and Gaveston has turned to his wife, that lovely penitent in a lovely gown, who is standing with her head a little bent, as it should be, but her eyes, as they have been since the story began, firmly fixed on Peter.

"Why couldn't you have told me this yourself?" asks Gaveston. It is his sole reproach. He looks a little older, a little graver—no more. He even smiles as his eyes meet hers.

"I'm sorry," says the lovely Cecilia, advancing to him with her hands outstretched, and the nervous smile of a child upon her lips. "But I couldn't *make* myself do it. You know I promised you, Peter, never to get into debt again, and really I don't know how this horrid two hundred pounds mounted up—so what I hoped was, that I could borrow the money from Nell, and say nothing to you about it, because I knew it would vex you."

Gaveston gazes at her. She is always a surprise to him.

"But, my dear, isn't *that* getting into debt?" asks he, mildly.

"*To Nell?*" arching her pretty brows.

"In debt to *me*?" cries Nell, in astonishment, and indeed, here both the sisters laugh as if at one of the funniest things in the world.

Gaveston, who is a slow man, feels unequal to the explaining of this bit of principle, so declines upon more open ground.

"If you must borrow, let it be from me," says he, "and then you will be in no one's debt."

"Yes, I shall indeed," cries Cecilia radiantly. "And to the dearest of all kind dears." Her pallor has disappeared, her eyes are sparkling, her lips smiling. The pale blue handkerchief is under her foot. "But I'm afraid you think badly of me, Peter," her head a little on one side, her glance half roguish, half appealing. "However, it is the last time really! From this out I shall be positively *parsimonious*."

At this Nell smiles, and Peter Gaveston, as though suddenly struck by an idea, turns to her.

"And how was it that you were prevented from lending this money?" asks he.

"Why, Sir Stephen," says Nell, with a shrug. "He refused to let me have what," defiantly, "is my own."

Gaveston colours a dark red.

"You asked Wortley for money for——?"

"No, no, no!" cries the girl, shocked. "Dear Peter, no. Of course I mentioned nothing beyond the fact that I wanted the money. For myself, you know. After all," with a tender glance at Cecilia, who is now ruffling up her beautiful hair before a mirror, with both hands, "Cecilia is myself."

"I must, however, request, Penelope" (Penelope is Miss Prendergast's whole name), "that for the future you will not lend any money to your sister. When she wants it—she can come to me."

It occurs to poor Nell, as a little piece of injustice, that Peter is far more angry with her for merely wishing to lend the money to Cecilia, than with the latter for having wanted to borrow it—and for getting into debt, and for having concealed matters, and all the rest of it.

"Don't scold Nellie," says Cecilia, turning round with a gay and smiling face. "Scold me. I'm the culprit. Sit down here, Peter," patting the lounge on which she now has seated herself, "and give me a regular 'talking to.' That's what Jones says her father does to *her*."

A faint contraction of Gaveston's brow is noticeable. It lasts only for a moment. Nell, perhaps, is faintly conscious of it. That allusion to Jones's father—That Cecilia meant anything was absurd, and surely

the very fact of her saying it so unconsciously shows that she herself does not see that at certain times—a time such as this, for example—when she is glowing, and Gaveston depressed—she might easily be taken for his daughter.

"I don't think I'll give you that 'talking to' to-day," says he smiling. Is there sadness in the smile? "We'll let it hold over."

"Over my head? Like the nasty old sword of somebody?" cries Cecilia, clasping her slender white hands above her sunny hair, and peeping at her husband from under them, as if in great dismay. "Oh! you mustn't do that! How can I enjoy myself at our dance if you aren't *quite* friends with me? By-the-bye, Peter," in the airiest way, "what shall I wear?"

"If it's coming to petticoats, I'm off," says Gaveston, who has quite recovered his spirits since his wife's coquettish glance at him from under her pink palms. He goes to the door, and then stands still.

"You'll want a dress for that," says he.

"Ye—es."

"Allowance all gone?"

She spreads her hands abroad in desolation.

He laughs. Such a good, round, honest laugh.

"Will twenty do it?"

"Oh! *Peter!*" ecstatically. "*Much, too much!*"

"Still"—he evidently understands her in *some* ways—"we'll make it twenty!"

"Nell, do you hear that?" Peter's wife springs to her feet. "Isn't he generous— isn't he *too* good?" she appeals to the girl in the lightest way. Her manner, indeed, has all the air of one who is speaking to another about a mutual acquaintance, or a cousin, or a relation by marriage—a nice creature, but remote. A friend, in fact, in whom, for the first time, she has discovered a most desirable virtue. It is certainly, at all events, *not* the tone of a wife discussing a husband.

She steps blithely towards Peter, on the tips of her toes.

"Thank you, thank you, *thank* you!" cries she, so prettily. Then all at once, with a sudden change of manner, she stands back from him, and regards him with a sombre air.

"Peter!" breathes she tragically, "look to yourself! I feel I *must* do it! Prepare for the worst I know—I know I am going to—*kiss you!*"

With this, she precipitates her slim self into his embrace.

They all laugh. Gaveston clasps her to him, and gives her three kisses for her one.

"Nell," cries she, pushing him lightly from her, "I had almost forgotten. Why, this is the day we promised to go to Lady Hopkins. Hurry, hurry, hurry! and dress yourself. Not coming, Peter? What a *shame!* How do you suppose I am going to get on without you? Really, this is cruel neglect of a lovely wife. Some day, when I don't come back, you'll be sorry."

She throws him a kiss, and disappears into her dressing-room beyond. She has forgotten, as though it had never been, her distress of an hour ago.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Whoso shall telle a talē after a man,
He moste reherse, as neighe as ever he can,
Everich word, if it be in his chargē,
All speke he never so rudely and so largē;
Or elles he moste tellen his tale untrewē,
Or feinen thinges, or finden wordēs newe."

"Quite a sensation, this dance of yours, Mrs. Gaveston." The speaker is a good-looking boy from the Barracks at Boreton, who had fallen a victim to Mrs. Gaveston's charms very early in the afternoon. Cecilia, in her latest Parisian gown, and with a big picture hat on the top of her head, gives him a smile. She is sitting on a garden chair, on a side bit of Lady Hopkins' lawn, that overlooks the sunk tennis-courts on her left. The game below is growing very exciting. Lady Hopkins, kindest of women, has got up a small tournament to amuse her "young friends" (as she calls everyone—good creature—under sixty), and has given into Mr

McGregor's hands a dear little gold bangle and the inevitable cigarette-case, to be presented to the successful tennis players at the end of the day. There was quite an excitement about it an hour ago, when the drawing for partners was taking place. Up to this, a dilapidated young man, with a lantern jaw, and a racket tied up with string, is having it all his own way. He had been lucky enough to draw as his partner one of the Miss Woods of Woodville, who, ten years ago, had been the champion players of the county, and who still can do wonders by fits and starts. The Miss Wood in question is named Susannah, she is tall and gaunt, her complexion somewhat suggestive of leather.

"Been stationed here now," goes on the good-looking boy, who has accepted the smile as the prettiest answer to his opening remark he has ever heard, "for ten months, and never heard of a dance before."

"Never heard of a dance before? You ought to take dancing lessons," says Cecilia.

The most satisfactory thing in the world is to be beautiful. This answer of Cecilia's is accepted as quite a sparkling piece of wit by all the young men around her; even Stairs, who is sitting about a yard away, and who is studying her without seeming to do so, smiles faintly.

"So awfully jolly of you to think of it," says another young man, whose sole claim to notoriety lies in the fact that he has no chin. "This part o' world, you know, really beastly dull, you know!"

"I love it!" says Mickey, who has just come up with Nell and Grant. "I quite acknowledge that Bigley-on-Sea can hardly be called the '*liveliest* village of the plain,' but it has its parts! There's nothing to do here. That's what I love. Splendid recommendation in my eyes."

"Oh, *your eyes!*" says Nell, *sotto voce*. "I don't believe they see anything."

"They do, my darling. They do. They see *you*," says the Irishman, with a profound sigh that comes from his—lungs.

"Nell," calls Cecilia, "come here! We're talking about our dance."

Nell turns, and Cecilia introduces the two cavalry men to her, whereupon the chinless one, without a

second's delay and to Grant's open annoyance, draws a chair up to hers, and begins to give her—poor girl!—his views on things in general.

Grant, who had commenced a steady flirtation with Nell, half because she is the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood, and half to please his sister, who is never tired of dinning in his ears the fact that three hundred a year would be a great addition to his present income, has ended by falling very seriously in love with her. His folly has, indeed, at present grown to such a height, that to see another man, however poor a specimen, engross her attention for even five minutes, means misery. He fidgets a good deal—dragging his tent stool here and there, and dropping fragmentary remarks into the conversation, that Nell is keeping up—poor “Mr. Chin” being unequal to a protracted attack upon his brain.

Nell, who, I regret to say, is rather enjoying the situation, being in a very bad mood of her own, encourages “Mr. Chin,” whose real name is Trent, in the most shameful fashion, to Mickey's immense delight, whose chief work in life seems mischief.

Mrs. Chance, strolling up to the large group who are gathered here, looking at the semi-finals, finds herself unavoidably close to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. She accepts her fate gracefully, and sinks, as if delighted to find it, upon a seat close to her scourge.

“How terribly fast those two seem to be!” says she in a confidential whisper, indicating Mrs. Gaveston and her sister by a side glance. This is sure to be acceptable to the valuable, if hateful, Maria; both the Prendergasts being “objected to” by her.

“There is even a worse thing than a flirtation,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss magisterially. Slowly and with indignant meaning she surveys Mrs. Chance from head to heel, from the so evidently new frock, to the dainty bonnet that has not a particle of crape upon it. “There is extravagance!”

“You mean this dress?” asks Mrs. Chance, in the sweetest, lowest tone.

“And the bonnet,” severely.

“I half feared you would, but,” she struggles for a lie, and at last finds one; “it was dear Gerald gave me the money for them. A gift, you know. ‘Buy any

little present you like,' he said, so delightfully. So few brothers like that!"

"And a good thing, too!" says Mrs. Boss. "Your brother ought to have advised you to put by whatever money he gave you—(and really he must be a most extraordinarily affectionate brother to give you enough money to buy yourself this rig-out)," with an exhaustive glance at the costume in question through her glasses, "for a rainy day."

"Perhaps there won't be any rainy days," says Mrs. Chance, who is now boiling with rage. "The weather seems fine."

This little speech she could not have held back to save her life, but once said and seeing the storm it is bringing up in the useful cousin's brow, she grows frightened.

"Forgive me," says she, laying her hand on Maria's arm. "Such a silly joke! Of course I know I am all wrong, and you—you are so kind—to tell me. Yes, I daresay I have been extravagant, but Gerald would have been disappointed if I had not bought these things. I can't tell you how long I fought with myself about buying them, but when I thought of his self-sacrifice—his giving out of his slender income, so much, that I might——"

"Play the fool! He must be an idiot!" says Mrs. Boss, interrupting her without apology.

"Oh, no! Only the kindest brother in the world," says Mrs. Chance, with an appealing smile. After a second she drops her eyes, afraid they may betray her. At this moment she could willingly have done bad things to the perfect Maria. "I am afraid you are angry with me," she goes on meekly. It is easier to be meek with her eyes on the ground. "But I hardly knew what to do. If I saw more of you—but you come to us so seldom—I might learn."

"You would learn this!" says Mrs. Boss in a loud tone. "That for a woman with nothing a year to dress herself in all the newest fashions, is to be simply—dishonest. . . . Good gracious! there is Mrs. Willing over there! Actually out. And her baby not two months old. Stay here, I'll be back in a moment, when I have given her a hint about her behaviour. You were say-

ing something about those unfortunate Prendergast girls—I have something to say too.”

She strides across to where a tall young woman in pale grey crepon is standing.

“Wretch!” says Mrs. Chance under her voice. “When I marry Stephen, I’ll be head of the house, and after that—well, I pity Maria.” Her eyes are aflame, and though in this second of emancipation, when she might have uplifted them to the skies for all Maria could see of them, she still keeps them on the ground. It would not do to lose a point—someone *else* might be looking.

Presently Mrs. Boss comes back, rather—as Mrs. Chance cheerfully notices—considerably the worse for wear. It is plain that the tall young woman, with her first baby, has routed her with great slaughter.

“You explained to her, I hope, the injudiciousness of her conduct,” says Mrs. Chance tenderly and maliciously.

“Some people are not open to advice,” returns Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, solemnly, “That young woman is devoid of intellect. She would not listen to me. She had even the audacity to say, that when I was as clever as she was, and had given a child to the world, she would be delighted to come over and teach me how to make pap! In my opinion,” says Mrs. Boss, calmly, “she is on the road to perdition.”

“What a big long road it must be,” Mrs. Chance pauses, thoughtfully. “So many travel it. Look at Mrs. Gaveston. Do you know, I quite dread this new complication, this arrival of Captain Stairs, after all you have told me of her. She is so frivolous—no respect for anyone. Not even,” with a careful glance, “for you?”

“It is a small thing to me,” says Mrs. Boss, “what anyone says or thinks of me. I do my duty; that suffices me. I don’t care for the slanders of the crowd. They are nothing to me. But—er—what did that woman say?”

“Hardly a slander, you know. More of a gibe.” It is Mrs. Chance’s determination to set Mrs. Gaveston and her sister wrong at all points with everyone she knows. Sir Stephen’s half-formed admiration for Nell has not escaped her notice. And to be outdone in that direc-

tion! "It was a mere jest, really. But how they laughed——"

"Laughed!—at me!"

"Well, yes. And that was what annoyed me, to drag you into ridicule. You, who are so full of good works, without whom the village could hardly get on. But I heard her—myself—only a few days ago, make fun of your name. "She," Mrs. Chance looks down and lowers her voice, as if shocked, "was bringing you into ridicule about your kindly zeal over the villagers, and your tenants, and friends. She said—I thought it *very* impertinent—that you 'Boss'd the whole show,' or something like that."

"Bossed?"

"Yes. Boss, you know! Your *name*!"

"I see!" says Maria. To Mrs. Chance's everlasting surprise, the big woman seems amused. There is a twinkle in her eye. "Do you know, I never thought of that before! I wonder if George did! Boss! It does sound American, yet it is a good old English name too. I must tell George——" She breaks off. "But that impertinent young woman, to make fun of *me*! Really, I don't know whether she or that wretched Mrs. Wilding is the worst."

"Oh! I think Mrs. Gaveston! She is more flighty," says Mrs. Chance gently. "See her now; and her husband never with her—and that man always her shadow."

"Captain Stairs, you mean!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, leaning forward so as to get a better view of Cecilia, who now, indeed, is evidently engrossed in an animated discussion with Stairs. "Bless me! Yes. What on earth can Peter Gaveston mean by letting her go about like this, with no one to look after her? I really think I had better go, and give her a word of warning."

"No, no, *don't*," says Mrs. Chance, pulling her back. "Stephen—to Wortley, who is going by—" "come here. We want your advice." She smiles up prettily into his face from under the dainty new bonnet, and Sir Stephen stands still. "Maria thinks she ought to speak to Mrs. Gaveston about her—her——"

"Her conduct with Philip Stairs," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss bluntly; to do her justice, she is always very open

in her conduct—the only pardon that can be accorded to it. “You know there used to be a love affair there, Stephen, years ago—before he went abroad. Bella has just reminded me of it.”

“It is well to let sleeping dogs lie,” says Wortley. “Not that I think there is anything to let lie in this instance. Gaveston and his wife seem very well disposed towards each other.”

“Still—she is so *young*,” says Mrs. Chance, in her tenderest voice, that seems filled with divine pity for all the world. “And when one thinks of the difference in her and her husband’s ages. And her sister—she is so young, too, and so—so *very* frivolous—that I fear she can hardly be of any use to her. Don’t you think Miss Prendergast a little—just a *little* volatile?”

“I wonder what you mean by volatile,” says Wortley. “Of course, a young girl cannot be as sedate as a woman married. Youth must be given certain allowances.”

Youth! Laura, conscious of her thirty years, colours faintly.

“I am so glad to hear you talk so liberally about her,” she says sweetly. “I, myself, would desire to think the best. If she is to be my sister-in-law, I——”

“Your——?” Sir Stephen has turned upon her sharply.

“Oh! you *must* have noticed dear Gerald’s devotion—and her acceptance of it. I cannot believe she is so wanting in all feeling as to encourage him as she does, unless she means to accept him!”

“It will be a lucky thing for Gerald if she does have him,” says Maria, with all her fatal bluntness. “Three hundred a year would set him up a bit!”

Wortley says nothing. His mind is occupied with Bella’s last words. He glances a little farther on to where Nell is sitting, with Trent talking idiotic nothings to her, and Grant standing beside her glowering. There can be no doubt on earth about *his* infatuation. And the girl sitting there between them, smiling, plainly amused, careless of their feelings.

Is she so heartless as has been suggested—so frivolous—like her sister? All at once, the old story of Stairs’ mad affection for Cecilia; and her cruel disregard of it, once he had gone away, and her almost immediate

marriage with Gaveston—a man so much older than her—returns to him. He had forgotten all about it until now.

Indeed, most people had forgotten about that old affair until Captain Stairs' return and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss had reminded them of it. No one quite knows the rights of the story, and (except with regard to a few) but a meagre curiosity stirs anyone when it is mentioned.

Mrs. Gaveston, so petted, so spoiled, the idol of a most indulgent husband, would hardly be likely to think a second time of an attachment born years ago, and which, if ever it *had* come to anything, would have ended in nothing but poverty. The fact of Stairs coming into a property yesterday, as it were, had, of course, been discussed. Pity it had not been left to him years ago. But after all Mrs. Gaveston had been a mere child then, and really hardly knew what love meant.

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, however, whose relations with the thoughtless Cecilia are considerably strained, and whose memory is above reproach, has remembered everything, and from a high and moral point of view, has decided to keep her eyes open. She had indeed determinedly prognosticated evil from the return of Stairs to England, and the presence of his first and only love.

"Gerald would never take so sordid a view of it," says Laura, with gentle dignity. "He will marry for love—and love alone. The one who marries for anything else, must be mad indeed."

She casts a gentle glance at Sir Stephen, but Sir Stephen's eyes are fixed on Nell—Nell, who is laughing as happily as though the whole world is at her feet to play with.

CHAPTER XX.

"The ruling passion, be it what it will,
The ruling passion conquers reason still."

"Woman's at best a contradiction."

"Isn't there any tea to be had?" demands Mrs. Cutforth-Boss suddenly, in a loud tone. "Five o'clock and nothing! What on earth is the woman thinking about!"

"Beer, perhaps," suggests Mrs. Chance, with a little ill-natured titter—the late Sir John having, as has been said, made his money out of that excellent beverage.

"Well, I wish she'd divert her thoughts to tea for a moment or two," says Maria.

At this instant a couple of footmen, with trays, can be seen approaching.

"It's comin', it's comin'," says little Mr. Nobbs, who has toddled up with a view to making himself delightful to Cecilia.

"Like the Campbells," suggests Mickey. "By the bye, it's been going on in the tent over there for the last half hour."

"Then I think she might have had the courtesy to send some one to tell us about it," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss angrily. "Really, *no* one has any manners now-a-days." Her own are so painfully unequal to the necessities of the "now-a-days," of which she speaks, that Cecilia gets behind her fan with a view to getting off a little undiscovered mirth.

"Better late than never," simpers Mr. Nobbs, nodding his small head to and fro, and bobbing upon his toes and heels. "It's"—beginning the inevitable quotation gaily—"The voice of——"

"The footman, I heard him complain.' Didn't you?" interrupts Mickey most unkindly. "He was groaning like a grampus under that tray; knew you'd heard him. Had him there," whispers he to Nell. "Took the wind out of his sails, eh? *First* in?"

"You shall have the Victoria Cross the moment I go home," returns she.

"How much does that come to? A kiss?"

"Poof! don't be silly. Who'd kiss you?"

"Lots and lots of girls," says Mr. McNamara, with dignity. He climbs down immediately afterwards, however, and continues, sadly, "But always the ones I don't want to kiss."

"Just so," says Nell unfeelingly, and goes back to her conversation with Trent.

"Who is that extraordinary person to whom that silly Prendergast girl in speaking?" demands Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, of her brother. Sir Stephen is indeed still here, kept he hardly knows why, yet always with an

angry idea that it is because he can from this point see best the abominable behaviour of his ward. There is Grant glowering at her, but at her feet none the less; and that idiot Trent, "that unlettered small-knowing soul"—Wortley here is growing bitter—whispering absurd attempts at compliments into her ear; and to crown all, McNamara—— Though perhaps after all, McNamara is the least objectionable of the lot. After all, one would be a perfect idiot to be jealous of *McNamara*. No girl in her senses would believe in him!

But she! what is she? A trifle light as air?

"Don't know, I'm sure," says he, walking away. He had meant to speak to Nell—to explain things to her—to break through the cold crust of anger, the result of this morning's work, that is so extremely awkward now, considering how soon they will have to play together. But he gives that up, and walks away in another direction.

"I can see that dear Stephen so disapproves of that girl," says Mrs. Chance softly.

"Stephen is like me," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who could hardly be more unlike her brother if she tried. "He has a head on his shoulders. He will marry both wisely and well. I look for a title for Stephen."

Having thus disposed of both Nell and Mrs. Chance, she goes on her way rejoicing, and presently plants herself very close to Nell, who is still holding all three admirers in lively converse. Mrs. Boss having had her tea, feels now equal to any occasion. But unhappily so does Mr. McNamara, and Mickey once started, is bad to beat. Perhaps he has seen mischief in Maria's rolling eye, because he at once commences the campaign.

"This is my birthday," says he blandly. "Anyone going to give me a show? You? Mrs. Cutforth-Boss?"

"I disapprove of giving presents to people who are able to buy them for themselves," says Mrs. Boss.

"But I'm not," says Mickey. "I lost my last half-penny at Nap last night."

"May I ask," says Mrs. Boss, with a glare at Cecilia, "who won it?"

"You'd never guess," says Mickey genially.

"I have a strong belief I *could*," says Maria severely.

"You won't tell?" says Mr. McNamara, bending

towards her. "Sh!" with a glance at Cecilia, as if to warn Mrs. Boss not to let *her* hear. "Well, it was——"

"Go on, I know it!"

"You *know* it?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, well, at *that* rate," says Mr. McNamara in an aggrieved tone, "there isn't a bit of good in my telling you."

"But?" eagerly.

"No! no! no!" Mickey shakes his head disapprovingly. "You have deceived me. You have wasted my time. And on my birthday, too!"

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss gives him an angry glance and moves away.

"*This* your birthday?" says Nell, "why, it was only last week I heard you tell Cecilia——"

"That was only the *first* gong," says Mickey, unmoved. "A mere gentle reminder. The second has just sounded. I'm of age *to-day*; you wouldn't think it to look at me, would you? I hope"—sweetly—"you have remembered me? Any little present for me?"

"Not one," says Nell severely. "And as to your being of age——"

"Well—what's the matter with that?"

"Nothing, beyond the fact that I'm sure you were of age five years ago."

"Does that prevent my being of age now? How queerly girls argue. You haven't worked those suspenders then?"

"I haven't worked anything," says Miss Prendergast, very rightly turning her back on him. "And you *certainly* told Cecilia your birthday was on some day last week."

"Come for a walk?" says Grant quickly.

"I can't. What's the use?" says she with a faint show of irritation. "I shall have to play in this tournament almost directly. Afterwards—perhaps."

"That is a promise," eagerly.

"Is it?" She gives him a slow, adorable little smile. "Well, we'll see."

"Where's Grant?" cries somebody rushing up this moment. "Oh, there you are, you're wanted down below there. It's your turn now with Miss Browne."

That duffer with a racket tied up is holding his own all through. *Do* get him out if you can."

Grant with a muttered word rises, and leaves the haven where he would be.

"I don't believe you've had any tea yet," says Mickey to Nell, "come over here to this little table," pointing to his left, "and have some fruit, or cake, or something."

Nell, whose good spirits had deserted her when the subject of the tournament was brought up again, follows him, and soon has a plate well supplied with strawberries and cream beside her, and a few wafers.

This ought surely to have raised her to a healthy sense of the good of being alive. But even whilst eating the strawberries, she shows signs of gloom.

Mickey, who is "jabbering as usual"—an expression of Mrs. Wilding's, who calls herself an intimate friend of his, having met him once in Yorkshire—finds at last she isn't attending.

"Well, shouldn't I?" says he, meaning to confound her.

"Shouldn't you what?"

"I knew you weren't listening."

"I was, however. It was something about—about——"

"Oh, yes! *About*. I like that. I was talking of that last game I played. Did you watch it?"

"You were playing against the man with the bad racket. The racket tied up with a string."

"I was. May the devil," says Mr. McNamara piously, "fly away with him and his string. He beat me, yet I play a good game too, though I say it as shouldn't. I ought to have won that game."

"Well, why didn't you?" says Nell carelessly, who is feeling as though she hates everybody.

"I don't know. If I hadn't dropped that last ball into the net—— Anyway, I *ought* to have won the game."

"Then more shame for you. It seems you knew where your duty lay, and didn't perform it."

There is such a want of sympathy in the always delightfully sympathetic Nell, that McNamara regards her closely.

"What's the matter with you?" asks he presently. "You look down on your luck."

"And no wonder," says Nell; the desire to speak to somebody is growing too much for her. And Mickey—she loves Mickey—and he is so safe. He would never breathe a word. "I'll tell you," says she, leaning towards him across the little table. "Just *fancy*, I've been drawn to play with Sir Stephen!"

"Well!" Mickey has leant towards her in turn, and there is blank misunderstanding in his clear Irish eyes. This seems a poser; Miss Prendergast goes down before it.

"I don't believe he can play a bit," says she, a little sorry she has spoken.

"He plays uncommonly well, I can tell you. Better than most."

"He looks," contemptuously, "as if he could do nothing."

McNamara studies her a moment.

"He has done something to you anyway," says he.

"To *me*?" haughtily.

"Yes. To your own royal, high excellency! I have noticed a sort of chill between you and him all the afternoon; a regular cucumber coldness."

"You notice a great many things, it seems to me," angrily.

"Well—what are one's eyes for?"

"If you imagine he has annoyed me in any way, you are mistaken. I think him a very disagreeable person—nothing more."

"That won't count in a tournament. He's about the best player I ever met. Private player I mean, but even if it came to public playing—You'll win with him, Nell. You'll be the winners, you two, I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, no! I shall handicap him too heavily. I can't play a *bit* when people are looking on. However good a player he may be, he will lose with me."

"Not a bit of it. He'll win! Pull yourself together, and the game's your own."

"Well, I don't care whether it is or not," says Nell with a little frown. "I think they might have drawn me with some one else——"

McNamara shakes his head solemnly at her.

"Do you suspect them?" asks he. "Are you suggesting that there was no fair play? If so, why should they have elected you to be the partner of Wortley?"

"Yes, yes, you are right," says she quickly. "Of course it is all right. Everyone must know that I hate Sir Stephen."

At this instant someone appears on the right of the table. Neither of them had seen his approach.

"It is our turn now, Miss Prendergast," says Sir Stephen in a perfectly even tone.

CHAPTER XXI.

"All women born are so perverse
No man need boast their love possessing.
If nought seem better, nothing's worse,
All women born are so perverse.
From Adam's wife, that proved a curse
Though God had made her for a blessing,
All women born are so perverse,
No man need boast their love possessing."

NELL rises and goes with him; she is a little perturbed. Had he heard that last speech of hers? No. Surely not. He seems quite as usual. But silent, very silent. His silence gives Nell a chance.

"Sir Stephen!" says she coldly. "It is quite absurd your having *me* for your partner. I can't play at all. Is it not possible to get it rearranged? There are so many others, and all such good tennis players. Won't you see about it?"

"You mean," says Wortley, speaking for the first time since she has left McNamara and gone with him towards the tennis court. "You mean that you don't want to play with me."

"Certainly not! What I meant was that it is a pity that you should lose. If I withdraw they will have another lottery, and you will probably get some one else who will prove a good partner."

"I have already an excellent partner," says Wortley.

He does not look at her as he says it. The compliment falls indeed very flat. His voice is cold, indifferent, immovable.

"I am afraid you know very little about it, if you say that," says Nell icily. "I am the worst tennis player in the world—at times."

"I shall risk it." There is something dogged in his air. "And even," looking down at her, "if you are not up to the mark—to your usual mark, I mean, I have seen you play—I daresay I shall be able to pull you through." There is a distinct determination in his whole manner that annoys her. "To tell you the truth," continues he, always without looking at her however. "I distrust that bat of Berkley's—the string that has so nobly held it together up to this, must be nearly worn through now."

"He will probably get a fresh bit." Nell's tone is without interest, secretly she is furious at his offer to "pull her through." Such miserable conceit—such overbearing vanity, etc. "There is one thing, however, I think I had better mention. I," very clearly, "object to having my balls poached."

"I shall remember. I have not, however, that objection myself. If any ball of mine comes your way, and you think you can take it safely, I shall be immensely glad if you will do so."

Nell makes no reply to this. "Odious man," she says to herself. It had given her great satisfaction to forbid him to touch her balls, but now that she has done so, her heart sinks. If he *doesn't* help her, the small chance of their winning is entirely at an end; their downfall will be an ignominious one, and to be connected with defeat—! Defeat is always bitter to her!

But to go back now—to give in—and to *him*. To ask him to help her! No. It is not to be thought of for a moment. After all, if he does lose, it will be a very good thing, and make him less assured of himself in the future. The only thing is, of course, that it is unpleasant to be the one to make him or any one lose. Oh! if only she could play up for once in her life, and help to win this match without his assistance. Sometimes she can play quite surprisingly, but, unfortunately, not when there is an audience. The very fact of people

looking on, and expecting wonders from her, puts her off her stroke.

"Shall I go and see when we are to begin?" asks Wortley courteously.

"Yes. Please."

Nell, waiting in rather a quaking mood for his return, finds herself standing almost under a huge escallonia bush—half hidden by it indeed. From the other side a voice comes to her.

"Oh! no," says someone. "Poor Sir Stephen! He has not the *least* chance. He plays quite splendidly himself, but he will be far too heavily handicapped by Miss Prendergast to do anything. She——" The voice and its owner have evidently turned a corner and are gone. The voice was the voice of Mrs. Chance.

All at once a change takes place in Nell. Her heart seems to leap up within her, and grows strong and brave. She gives the racket she is holding a little swing. *That woman! Ah!*

When Sir Stephen, a few minutes later, returns hurriedly to tell her they are to begin now, he finds her looking almost *tall*, with her cheeks delicately flushed, and her eyes alight. What has happened to her? Her very step seems to have caught additional elasticity. He is indeed hard put to it to keep up with her, as she goes to the field of battle. The very way she grasps her racket breathes of slaughter. Positively there is a smile upon her lips. Finally, to his everlasting astonishment, she turns to him as they take their places, and whispers to him, sharply, eagerly:

"We shall win!"

There is a touch of *camaraderie* in her whole air. Has she forgotten the late feud?

* * * * *

"Oh! there is Nell going to play," cries Cecilia suddenly, "I want to go nearer to watch her." Many people on the seats round her had left and taken up positions farther down, feeling a little pleasurable excitement over this final set. The man with the disreputable racket, and his partner (now looking a little frowsy, and with her hair in a melancholy state of collapse), are looking full of hope and courage, and are already indeed quite giving themselves airs—nodding blithely

to their intimate friends and backers, as though to say: "It is all right now. The day is ours! If we have beaten all along the line so far, there is nothing to dread!" And indeed, a few whispers of Nell's playing have been circulating—of her want of nerve—her uncertainty—the trick she has of putting her balls into the net, etc.

Mrs. Chance has been going about breathing little sentences to this effect, and, "Such a pity poor dear Sir Stephen, who really you know plays beautifully, should have been drawn with such an *uncertain* player."

Cecilia looks round to find someone to escort her to a better place for looking on; but Stairs only is beside her. Even the good-looking boy has flitted across the ground to make a bet with a friend on the coming event.

"There is a shady seat over there where you can see well, I think," says Stairs. "Shall we try it?"

Cecilia rises eagerly.

"Darling old Nell, I wish she could win, if only to vex that horrid Mrs. Chance," says she, some of the latter's velvety speeches about Nell having reached her.

The spot chosen by Stairs is a little remote from the others. A small, rustic seat under a huge branching elm, that makes a splendid umbrella to keep off the burning sun, and although it keeps them a little behind the other onlookers, still there is a capital view of the court and the players.

"Oh, what a lovely spot you have chosen, Phil," says Cecilia settling herself daintily with her back against the trunk of the grand old tree. All round the scene is very fair, the heat soft and languorous; a little silken breeze is blowing, and from the meadows down below small white-brown seeds of thistle-down are floating through the golden air.

"It is the time when lilies blow,
And clouds are highest up in air."

Stairs, whose every fibre thrills to her voice, pales a little beneath that friendly "Phil." How it brings back all. Those dear sweet days . . . *all*.

Ever since that day when he had unexpectedly come upon her and her husband in the wood he had lived in

a sort of hell. He had thought of her in many ways during that cruel time in India and afterwards on his return—as married—as happy in her married life—as unhappy—but somehow he had *never* thought of her as a *mother*!

The sight of the boy Geoffrey had been a death-blow—a stab—from which he could not recover; she—his little love—his sweetheart—the pretty child he had left—the mother of another man's son!

When first he saw the boy, with his strange likeness to his mother, a sort of frenzy seized him. He knew then what murderers must feel before they commit the vilest crime of all. That she should have borne a son to him—his rival! He could have cursed Gaveston aloud for that. If she had remained childless—God knows what thoughts worked in Philip Stairs' mind, but I think he could have forgiven her more easily—but for that.

And yet to curse Gaveston! Having seen him it seemed hard—impossible. That kindly honest gentleman! Stairs knew he would have been glad to find him a scoundrel—an irredeemable brute—but Gaveston was a man that no other man could ever despise.

He saw that, being no fool, and his misery grew. Did she love him? Could she? That man—so much older than herself—her sweet, her *lovely* self! It was certainly possible. The man was lovable in many ways, and there was the boy—the child! That tie of all things the strongest. No, he was cast behind—forgotten—left dying on the road of her life—sighing his time away, with

“Love going out in despair.”

Cecilia has been talking gently all this time—he answering mechanically.

“I really think Nell will win after all,” cries she suddenly, leaning forward, her arms upon her knees. “Oh, what a *beautiful* serve! Did you see how it ran along the ground? He couldn't take it—that immaculate person with the queer old racket. There again! And Nell—why she usually can't play a bit in public, you know—but now——”

“She is doing splendidly,” says Stairs, who in spite of

the belief that he is for ever beyond amusement of any kind is now growing interested. "And yet someone told me she couldn't play a screw."

"Ah! that was Mrs. Chance, she hates poor Nell," says Cecilia, whispering to him as one would to an old and appreciated friend. "She's a wretch, that woman! She'd say *anything* if she didn't like one."

"She doesn't like you!"

"Me! Oh, no. Not a scrap," says Cecilia. "And I'm so glad. I hate people whom *I* hate to like *me*!"

"Poor people!" says Stairs.

Cecilia laughs.

"You needn't be so very sympathetic," says she. "I don't hate you!"

"No?" Stairs turns aside abruptly—a branch growing over his head has apparently attracted his attention. "That is good for you," says he in a would-be indifferent tone.

"There, what a stroke," cries Cecilia excitedly. "Why, Nell is excelling herself. Oh! *Did* you see that? Ah, if only she can keep it up—but poor old Nell is so nervous."

"She doesn't seem nervous to-day."

"No. I can't think why. There *again*!" as Nell, much more to her own surprise than anyone else's, plays a ball into such an unexpected corner as no man can reach. In fact, Nell is playing to-day as she never played before, and as in all probability she will never play again. Her nerves have turned to steel, and her whole blood is on fire.

"She and Wortley will win," says Stairs.

"I hope so!"—she looks at him. "Don't you?"

"You know I do." His desire for Nell's victory is now indeed very keen. He is leaning forward in quite an excited way, and his whole expression has altered. He is another being—he is the man Cecilia had known six years ago.

For a little time she looks at him as if taking in this sudden wonderful change, that, alas! brings back to her the past with most unfortunate vividness. She moves a little nearer to him—she feels happier with him. He is so like what he used to be—her friend—her chum!

"Phil!" says she impulsively.

CHAPTER XXII.

"For what wert thou to me?
How shall I say? The moon,
That poured her midnight noon
Upon his wrecking sea—
A sail, that for a day
Has cheered the castaway."

STAIRS recovers himself with a start. All at once Nell and her chances of winning fade into a lost background. He has forgotten her as completely as though that rather finished coquette had never existed.

"Yes?" He is looking at Cecilia now with a rather frowning expression, and there is coldness in his question. Each time she utters his name—the old name, that once when used by her would thrill his heart to happiest delight—he feels so sharp a pang as makes endurance difficult. His frown deepens.

"Ah! now you are growing cross again," says Cecilia, with an adorable pretence at fear. "Not like my old Phil! Not like the friend I knew."

Stairs grows a little pale; and then all at once he understands her. She is not cold, or brutal, or a mere inconsequent coquette. It is only that she herself does not know. She believes in a friendship for him—she has no thought of deeper feelings. She has convinced herself that the old love she bore him, was as the love she bears him now, the remembered love of a child for its chosen companion, no more!

"You were going to say something," says he a little hoarsely, turning his eyes from the beautiful ones that are looking into his so clearly.

"Yes, I was. But it is so hard to speak to you, you change so. Just a moment ago I felt as if I knew you, a moment later and you were a stranger."

"We all change in six years," still not looking at her.

"You may!" says Cecilia with a delightful attempt at

huffiness. "But I"—she pauses, and a little laugh breaks from her. "Look at *me*—do *I* change?"

"Women are different from men," says Stairs, his eyes on the ground.

"How do you know that? In this case at all events you are no judge, because"—she moves a little nearer to him, and mischievously lowers her face, until it is *under* his—"you won't look at me."

Stairs' eyes are now on hers.

"Well, *am* I changed?"

"Beyond recognition almost," says he in a low, if passionate tone. "You were a girl when I left you, you are the wife of Gaveston now. It leaves little to add in the way of change. But," controlling himself with an effort, "all this is beside the mark. You wanted to ask me a question."

"Perhaps! However, I don't want to ask it now," says Cecilia, who has been so persistently spoiled for the past six years, that opposition disturbs her peace. "I don't want to ask a question of any one who doesn't want to answer it. And you, Phil—I do think it is rather nasty of *you*, to talk to me like that!"

"Like what?" This little faint squabble brings back to him the old days. How often they had quarrelled over "this and that,"—such happy quarrelling.

"As if you were one of those old cats in the village, where we lived when first we met—you remember them? That dreadful old Miss Brent, who prophesied that *you* would be transported and that I should come to a bad end? How we used to laugh?"

"Laugh!" Stairs draws a long breath. How gay she seems over her memories. "Yes, we used to laugh then!"

"Well, I am glad you remember so much," says Cecilia with a pretty, girlish sort of reproach that goes to his heart and sears it. "Because—and this was really the question I wanted to put to you—why were you so cold and indifferent to me the day we first met again—that day at Lady Hopkins'—you remember? I thought it was dreadful of you. You just looked at me, and when I held out my hands *like this*——"

She makes a little gesture and he takes the pretty hands for a moment in his, hardly pressing them, then pushes them back to her as if fearing them.

"I was dreadfully rude, I suppose," says he, with a ghost of a smile. "But I was wise too."

"Wise?" He has turned his face from hers again. "How were you wise?"

"*Cecilia!*"

Her name has burst from him, as though forced from his lips in spite of him.

"Ah!" cries she gaily, "now we are friends again. '*Cecilia*,' you used to call me that often in the old days. But far more often *Cissy!* Have you forgotten?"—she laughs at him lightly from under her hat. Her eyes are full of joy. "Nell has come to live with us now, and sometimes *she* calls me *Cissy!* I love it!" Her smile deepens, and grows sweeter. "It reminds me of the old days, and of you, and——"

At this moment a shout comes from the tennis court, a shout of victory. Cecilia springs to her feet.

"She has won!" cries she, "Nell has won! Oh, how lovely! Come, let us go and congratulate her."

"She will have many to wish her joy," says Stairs in a strange hurried voice. "She can afford to miss you. Stay here, I have much to tell you. Those old days of ours—those you *know* of—but let me tell you of those that followed them?"

"Your life in India?" Cecilia who has risen sinks back into her seat again, her eyes on his. "Tell me," says she.

She has forgotten Nell and her victory.

Nell is surrounded on all sides. Everyone is saying pretty things to her. Mr. Nobbs has presented her with the orchid from his coat. There is a little astonishment mingled with the congratulations, but in truth *no* one is so astonished at her success as Nell herself. She confesses this gaily to Miss McGregor, who, with Mrs. Chance, has just come up.

"Ah, you must not depreciate yourself," cries Mrs. Chance airily. "You will get plenty to do it for you, so spare yourself!"

"Not so very many, I hope," says Nell, even more airily still. "One *here*," she pauses—it is the slightest pause, but it gives time for her eyes to meet the widow's—"and there, but no more."

"Quite so. Quite so!" says Mrs. Chance; she looks a little uneasy however. Does Nell mean anything? "For myself I always predicted your victory."

"Ah! yes. I *heard* you," says Nell, smiling. Her eyes again catch and hold Mrs. Chance's . . . and the latter, with a heightened colour, looks back at her. Undoubtedly the girl had heard her many predictions to the contrary. She is a little puzzled about her next move, when her brother providentially comes to the rescue.

"A thousand congratulations," cries he, rushing up; his handsome face aglow with honest delight. He holds out his hand impulsively, and as Nell slips hers into it, a light of triumph warms his eyes. "It was splendid—splendid!" cries he. "Now wasn't it?" He turns to Sir Stephen, who is standing close to Nell.

"Not more than I expected," says Wortley calmly.

"Of course not—but——" Grant finds himself a little forced into the background by this very superior compliment of Wortley's.

"It was more, *far* more, than anyone could have expected," says Nell, warmly. "As a rule, I am a most miserable player when anyone is looking on, but to-day—of course it was Sir Stephen," with a slight and most unwilling glance at him, "who has won the game—but I don't know what made me play even as well as I did to-day, unless it was——"

Here she turns crimson, she was very *near* telling him it was because she had overheard his sister's unkind comments on her play, and her undisguised longing that she might lose.

"Never mind what it was," says Grant joyously. "Come and have some tea; you must be quite exhausted after that valiant fight."

Sir Stephen steps forward.

"I was taking Miss Prendergast to have some claret-cup," says he courteously. His mouth has taken a rather cold expression, however. He looks at Nell, and at once she feels that he is leaving the whole matter to her, giving her her choice freely, declining to interfere, however she may decide. *Shall* it be tea, or claret-cup? She lifts her eyes to his, and he meets her glance calmly, immovably. Yes, she is to decide. This very bringing of her to bay, as it were, annoys her further.

Does he expect her to decide in his favour? How he dares things!

"Tea, I think," says she sweetly.

Wortley bows and moves back a little, and instantly enters into a most animated conversation with Miss McGregor; his laugh indeed a second later floats to Nell's ears.

"That was good of you," says Grant to her in a rapturous whisper; he is so far gone in love's young dream now, that even if she were the veriest pauper on the face of the earth he would have clung to her. All those old poisonous hints of his sister's about the useful three hundred a year that pertains to her are quite forgotten. "Too good of you!" says he. There is such heart-felt meaning in his tones, that Nell feels it is impossible to be angry or anything else with him, except amused. There is a good deal of the boy about Grant still, and it attracts Nell.

"What was good?" says she. "To ask you to get me a cup of tea?"

"Not so much that, as to make it a walk over for me, and compel Wortley to take a back seat."

At this moment Wortley's laugh comes again to her. He is evidently having quite a good time with the plain but highly accomplished and really delightful Elspeth McGregor.

"You mustn't credit me with too much *finesse*," says she, a little sharply. "To create a sensational drama out of a mere commonplace is difficult. I prefer tea to claret-cup, that is all."

"Is it?" Grant's face falls and he regards her with open dejection. "I must say I never met a girl who could give it to one so badly," says he, with a reproach that is cutting. "I had hoped—that—you——"

"Oh, hope—hope!" cries Nell hastily. "No one but a madman hopes in these days. I'm sure I've hoped myself for things, over and over again, and never once got one of them——"

"What things?" asks Grant, eagerly.

Nell breaks into low but almost hysterical laughter. Her short-lived fear has come to an end. Really, he is too silly for anything.

"Things you can't give me, at all events," says she.

"Frocks—hats—all sorts of things." She throws out her hands graphically.

"Why can't I give them to you?" begins Grant, passionately—"I——"

A little swift backward movement of the people near them compels him to step to one side, Nell to the other, the latter very gladly. To her it is the most providential interference.

And now everyone is drawing back a little, and Lady Hopkins, smiling, rubicund, friendly, comes through the groups, attended by quite a little court, and advances, beaming upon Nell.

"Your bracelet, my dear!" says the good creature, smiles on every feature. "And *well* you won it. I'd like to present it to you myself, but," says the gentle, kindly, if slightly vulgar widow of the late brewer, "I'm sure you'd rather one of your gentleman friends should do it. I was always like that as a girl myself. Now who will you choose, my dear? Sir Stephen." She beckons in her homely way to Wortley, and Wortley gives her her answer. He makes a slight but emphatic gesture—a gesture towards Grant. Nell sees it!

Lady Hopkins, smiling from ear to ear and now thoroughly convinced that Grant is engaged to Nell, calls to Alec, who had seen nothing of the little by-play between her and Wortley. He comes at once, and the good, fat woman gives him the pretty bangle, and asks him to fasten it on Nell's wrist.

Nell, whose smile to Lady Hopkins is a little pale and forced, holds out her hand, and the bangle is clasped round it by Alec—to the admiration of a large and conversational crowd.

"I suppose your brother thinks he is in love with that silly little fool," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss to Bella.

"I really don't know," says Bella, thoughtfully. "It would," with an anxious sigh, "be a risk, wouldn't it?"

In her heart she is wondering fearfully whether the "little fool" thinks she is in love with her brother. That would mean so much more. Little fools with three hundred a year, however objectionable, are not to be sneezed at, in these pauperish days.

Meantime Alec has closed the clasp of the bangle round Nell's wrist, and has heard her laugh of pleasure.

Nell, who is still only half a woman, has recovered her chagrin and been elevated into a very heaven of delight over her day's victory.

"Isn't it a pretty bangle? Isn't it lovely? Lady Hopkins, you have made me so happy."

Her charming face, so full of light and laughter, seems to stir up the place and render it radiant.

"It is *too* pretty—too sweet a gift. I feel somebody else ought to have it—but," with a light laugh, "I am so glad they haven't. Tea, Mr. Grant! I feel I am above tea! I want nothing now—nothing at all. What *can* one want when one has got such a bangle as this?"

It is at last with difficulty that Grant draws her away to get the long promised cup of tea.

She has just got it, when Mr. Nobbs steps up to her—the very ideal of a middle-aged robin.

"Hah!" says he, bending before her as though bowing to a conqueror. "What a day! I assure you, Miss Prendergast, I have looked on breathless! 'Tis not in mortals to command success!" He rolls out this quotation with much unction. "Or else, believe me, I'd have been at your service. But, as things have happened, you required no prayers at all. 'The beautiful!'" Mr. Nobbs, quotes again, standing back, and leering at her with truly brilliant appreciation. "'The beautiful was there, triumphant!'"

Nell laughs in spite of herself. He is so small, so persistent, so abominably vulgar; yet he believes in himself so much, stands so high on a little pedestal of his own, that it would be cruel to dislodge him.

"I've been just holdin' sweet converse with your charmin' sister," says Mr. Nobbs, who has carefully studied the very *best* people, and has decided that "gs" are out of fashion. "And she's promised to come to my little den to-morrow evenin'."

He bends towards Nell, ogling her in the most fascinating way, whilst tilting himself delicately on his heels and toes, now forward, now back again.

Grant's face as he watches him is a picture.

"A den," continues he, with his everlasting cackle, "but without a lion for its tenant. Te, he, he! Only a *quite* obscure person. Very little to tempt you to

come, I'm afraid, Miss Prendergast. Few guests beyond our friend here," nodding gaily to Grant, "and some others, but *one* at least I can commend as distinguished enough to meet," with a low bow, "even you!—"

"And who is that?" asks Nell indifferently, beginning to feel a little wearied.

Mr. Nobbs draws back, and throws himself into a dramatic attitude.

"'Music, heavenly maid!'" cries he with immense force, "will, I trust, be with us! And *what* a guest! Miss Prendergast, I need not ask, I'm sure your face betrays it—music to you, as to me, is an eternal good!"

"I am very fond of it," says Nell calmly.

"Naturally! 'Sweets to the sweet,' eh?" Here he nearly falls over his own toes in his anxiety to make his compliment felt. "Miss McGregor has a most satisfactory voice. And she has kindly consented to sing for me. So I hope you'll find some little amusement."

"You are very kind," says Nell.

"No—no—no! The kindness is all on your side!"

"Not all, you forget the 'heavenly maid,'" says Nell, laughing. "By-the-bye," mischievously, "I think I shall tell Miss McGregor of the delightful name you have given her."

"Oh, now, Miss Prendergast—*pray!* I beg you. 'As you are strong, be merciful.' And you must have understood my little quotation. I assure you I had no thought of Miss McGregor in my mind. If I had dared to use the word 'heavenly' with regard to any of my lady friends, I know," bestowing a beaming leer on her, "who that one would be!"

"Ah! now, now, *now!* Mr. Nobbs!" cries Nell archly. "No more of that! I fear—I *greatly* fear you are a sad flirt!"

She goes off, nodding and laughing back at the little man, who, transported with pride, wafts her dainty kisses from the tips of his lavender kids.

"I wonder how you can flatter that little beast," says Grant, with fine disgust.

Nell laughs.

"You see there's no one else," says she.

"There's me," says Grant.

"Do you want me," with a little damaging glance at him from under her long lashes, "to flatter you?"

"Ah! *that's* not what I want you to do," whispers he quickly, eagerly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Hans Breitmann gife a barty,
Dey had biano-blayin'."

"I've smashed my white fan," says Nell, entering Cecilia's room next night. "Can you lend me one?"

"Of course. Marshall, show Miss Nell where my fans are. Fancy your being dressed already!"

"Fancy your *not* being dressed!"

"I can't make up my mind," says Cecilia laughing. "It *does* sound absurd, doesn't it? I don't think I look very nice in this muslin, do I, Nell?"

"You look nice in everything," says Nell. "But that muslin," regarding the dainty costly gown as it lies upon the bed with some disfavour, "with all that lovely lace—surely it is a little too much for poor old Mr. Nobbs! I hope you aren't bent on conquest, Cissy."

"On conquest!" Mrs. Gaveston looks quickly at her. A startled light has sprung into her eyes.

"Of my Nobbs! Because I warn you that is *my* affair. I shall not permit interference."

Cecilia's laugh, though strained, has something of relief in it.

"I shan't interfere," says she. "Why should I? In fact, how could I?"

"True! you're married," says Nell gaily. "Your hunting days are over! I often think what a blessing it was for me, that you were 'ranged' before I came on the tapis. I shouldn't have had a chance. But now I'm safe. You've got your Peter, and that's all *you* want."

"Yes." Cecilia fastens a bracelet slowly round her wrist. "That's all I want. And so you think this muslin a little too much? You are right—quite right. Marshall, take it away." She waves her hand impa-

tiently towards the beautiful gown, as if out of temper with it. "And bring me my black lace gown. No, *not* that!" beating her foot upon the ground angrily, "the old one."

"*This*, ma'am?" The woman's tone is surprised—the dress in question is the one her mistress as a rule wears in the evening when at home, alone with her people.

"Oh, nonsense, Cissy, why go to the fair with the thing?" says Nell. "If that muslin is too good a frock, that black is too old. Consider your host's 'feelin's.'" Here she imitates Nobbs to perfection. "Bring out that new black dress, Marshall, and we'll put your mistress into it in five seconds."

Cecilia, a little glad perhaps to have the question decided for her, and a little ashamed too of her late irritation—an irritation so unusual, so strange—gives way, and presently she and Nell run downstairs to the library to find Gaveston smoking a pipe with an old and well-beloved jacket over his evening clothes.

"What, not coming?" cries Nell, who is honestly fond of him, and is disappointed.

"To hear poor little Nobbs twaddling all night? Not much," says Peter lazily. "I say, you two girls, don't be late."

"What hour shall we be back? Twelve?" Cecilia has come forward and is looking down at him anxious enquiry in her eyes—it is something so new for her to ask him to regulate here movements that he glances up in surprise. A glad—a charmed surprise.

"Why, what a good wife we're getting," says he, springing to his feet.

"No—but really, tell me how long I shall stay."

"Why, as long as ever you like—as long as ever you are enjoying yourself," says he, laying his hands on her shoulders, a favourite trick of his to her, and swaying her lightly to and fro. "How pretty she is in that black gown, eh, Nell?"

"I refuse to answer. She's growing frightfully conceited," says Nell, who is struggling with a button of her glove. "Just fancy, she wanted to put on her lovely muslin gown to go and see old Mr. Nobbs to-night. I say she is in love with him."

"No, she's not," says Gaveston, still holding Cecilia

and looking with his kindly honest eyes into the eyes he loves and trusts. "She's in love with no one but me—eh, Cis?"

"Why, of course," says Cecilia; she lays her cheek against his. Its heat surprises him.

"Oh, that's all very well," says Nell, who is in a teasing mood. "But I wouldn't believe her if I were you, Peter. I'd come and look after her."

"Yes, why don't you come?" says Cecilia quickly, sharply: "Why do you always stay at home now?"

"You are feverish," says Gaveston anxiously. "Your hands and your face are very warm. Do you think you are wise to go, or will you wait and I'll go with you?"

"No—no—no." Cecilia draws back and laughs gaily. "Can't one be warm in summer? And to bring you out for no reason at all—and besides, if you went to get ready now we should not be there till midnight—time for 'God save the Queen.'"

"Well—go," says Gaveston. "But do take care of yourself, and see, Nell, that she avoids draughts."

It is only when they are gone that Gaveston remembers that Cecilia had not given him a kiss at parting. She was not very well, perhaps, poor darling—she looked flushed.

* * * * *

As Mrs. Gaveston and Nell enter the drawing-room at "Bachelor Villa" someone has just "kindly consented to sing." The notes, powerful if a little cracked, are shaking the chandelier. Mr. Nobbs, meeting them with effusion, performs his greeting in dumb show, and leads them to a comfortable lounge with many becks and nods and wreathed smiles—but never a word. The "heavenly maid" has descended!

Whispering is going on gaily, nevertheless. No one is supposed to speak out loud whilst the singer or the player is delighting the audience, and yet somehow everyone manages to carry on a conversation, be the same more or less brilliant.

The women are, out and out, the best at this game, especially the married ones, who have learned the art of talking without appearing to do so, and are murmuring beneath their breath gay little scandals to the men

beside them, under cover of their fans. The fan is a great institution.

Here and there dotted round the room are the usual young men, who evidently regard the girl of the period as their lawful worshipper. During the pauses between the songs these youths stand or sit—generally they sit—listening benignantly to the artless prattle of the maidens with a smile that seems to say: "Yes, I know. I'll be good to you for a bit. I won't stir. I'll let you have a crow over all your other sisters, who I can see are devoured with jealousy because they have failed to secure *me*. Yes—go on! I'll give you five minutes, even ten, if you happen to be a little more amusing than is the rule with your absurd sex."

There are a few other men, even worse than these conquerors. Men who refuse to stir from the wall, to which they have apparently glued themselves, at the voice of the charmer, charm she never so wisely. Instead, they stand stiffly in a row (there are three of them), frowning at their irreproachable boots and evidently at feud with all the world. These are the shy men!

"I say, this is beastly slow," says Grant, who has got wedged in a corner with McNamara and a few others, and who can see Nell at the end of the room, looking a very dream in her soft white gown, and beaming in the most heartless fashion on that ass Trent. As long as this confounded song is going on it is impossible to go to her.

"Slow—but sure!" says Mr. McNamara firmly. "Terribly sure! The only thing to do on such an occasion as this, is to hold tight and pray for the morrow."

"To-morrow won't see me alive if this goes on!" says Mrs. Wilding. "I do hate a place where everyone can't speak at once." She puckers up her pretty brows most miserably.

"Ah, *you* must feel it," says Mrs. Chance, who is sitting beside her, and who can never resist a thrust.

Mrs. Wilding stares at her through her pince-nez, sufficiently long to make even Bella feel uncomfortable.

"So good of you!" says she at last, "quite a compliment. But of course I'm not 'everyone'! For all that

I like to hear my own voice sometimes. And that man——" Providence unfortunately has given Mrs. Wilding an ear—where music is concerned.

At the end of the room where the piano stands, a young man, short and remarkably stout, is yelling about the terrors of the deep. He is evidently under the impression that the night is wild, and that there is a tremendous storm on. Why—does not transpire, as the evening is of the very mildest order, and the soft swish, swish of the sleepy waves as they break upon the shore below is eminently reassuring.

But the stout young man has plainly his own ideas of the night. He breathes horrors about it from his boots and shrieks warnings of it from the top of his head. Finally he desires everyone to go and search the beach for the lonely dead.

Not a soul stirs? Having indeed given no motive for this tiresome order, naturally everyone is reluctant to run down to the sea in full dress—salt water destroys one's frocks so dreadfully.

As if angered by their cold refusal to search for the corpses, he grows violent, repeating his request four times, until at last everyone begins to wish *he* was a corpse, and not on the beach either, but well at the bottom of the raging sea he has so loudly insisted on.

"What the jauce ails him?" says Mr. McNamara, his indignation bringing out a lovely touch of the brogue. "He must be awfully bad, anyway. Why doesn't someone give him a drop of brandy?"

Presently the stout man, exhausted apparently by his appeals, goes down, as we can only hope his waves do too, and stepping into an admiring crowd round him, accepts their congratulations limply.

"It takes it out of me so much," says he with a languid air.

"But, dear fellow, consider what joy you give," cries Mr. Nobbs, ecstatically, patting him gently on the back.

Mr. Nobbs has many faults, and one painful vice. He is an amateur musician.

"Thank goodness that's over," says Mrs. Wilding to Sir Stephen, who has joined the little coterie in the corner.

Several other people have come up too, and now no one seems inclined to move. Not even Grant. Nell has disappeared with Trent.

"Is that Miss McGregor going to sing now?" asks Mrs. Chance, bending towards Wortley, and speaking in a low, confidential tone. "How dreadfully plain she does look, poor *dear* girl! quite old in that gown."

Indeed, Miss McGregor—who, if one of the best of girls, is decidedly one of the plainest—is wrapped up to-night—it would be a mere mockery to call her dressed—in the very fustiest way.

"I've heard people say she is twenty," says Mrs. Wilding with a little giggle.

"Twenty what?" asks Mickey—"stone?"

No one answers this amazing question. Perhaps because it is so easy.

"Do you know I like that girl?" says Grant suddenly.

"The faint praise that damns," returns Mrs. Chance in her slow, hesitating way. "Do you think?" smiling at her brother, "you are the only one who admires her. Oh, I could tell you many. They say she is very rich, you know—that she has—well, more suitors than most."

"I heard Stairs was distinctly *épris* there," says young Manners, who has joined them.

"Oh, *no*!" Mrs. Chance looks directly at Wortley, compelling his gaze. "Captain Stairs is not in love with *her*. He—has other thoughts."

She has conveyed her meaning to Stephen perfectly. It is always her desire to damage Nell and her sister in his eyes. But the odd, queer thing of it all is, that in her endeavour to damage them, she only destroys herself. Each word against Nell and her sister only sets Wortley against the sayer of it. As she hopes to destroy Nell, so she destroys herself.

At this moment Wortley almost dislikes her.

"What I think about poor Miss McGregor is that she is so dull," says Mrs. Wilding.

"On the contrary, I hear she is immensely clever," says Grant.

"Ah! that no doubt is why she is so dull. The smarter you are, the stupider you seem sometimes," says Mrs. Chance.

"I don't believe a word of it." Mrs. Wilding, who prides herself on her *esprit*, throws up her saucy head. "I don't believe she's got an idea in her. If she had it would come out."

"I'm afraid I can't let you rest happy there," says Wortley. "She's written something for *The Depths* this month."

Manners laughs. "Have *The Depths* swallowed it?" asks he.

"Well, in a sense."

"I hope there is no chance of its reappearing," says Mickey. No one takes any notice of this pleasantry.

"It is rather advanced. On the whole duty of *Woman!* Not seen it? Argues yourself unseen. Everyone is talkin' about it. Thorough—very thorough," says Mr. Nobbs, who has just come up and has heard something of the conversation. "She's taken up quite a new line, ye know."

"That's the thing, nowadays," says Grant; "you might shriek yourself dead with eloquence over the old theories, and no one would listen to you, but just strike out a fresh foot-path, and all will run with you along it. Something about women for choice—cigarettes, or brandy, or trousers, or hospital walking, and there you are. It's a compliment, you see," checking Mrs. Wilding's indignant disclaimer. "It shows how much you are on the brain. No getting rid of your fascinations. And it's not rude, only practical. I haven't said a word about flirting, have I?"

Here Mrs. Wilding makes a furtive grimace at him, and declines behind her fan.

"Well anyway, in spite of her cleverness, I think she wants a *push*," says McNamara, who has all an Irishman's abhorrence of ugliness. "She may be a good girl and a clever one, but by George"—this to Grant in a whisper—"if you took her at all, it would have to be with *many* grains of salt."

Grant laughs.

"Well, certainly," says he, "she is a backward movement. However, I hear Stairs——"

"Nonsense, you know Stairs as well as I do."

"She's got money," says Grant.

"And what's that?" says the Irishman "Look here,

Grant, this is how I look at it! How would your tea taste if you had to drink it opposite to her every morning of your life for the next fifty years? Bitter, I think, eh?"

Grant makes no reply. He is looking across the room to where Miss McGregor is standing near the piano.

Someone has just come up to her—someone in black—and beautiful.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Give not thy tongue too great a liberty, lest it take thee prisoner."

"A word unspoken is like the sword in the scabbard, thine. If vented, thy sword is in another's hand."

"SHE's got her foil now," says he at last. Everyone looks as he is looking. Miss McGregor, heavy, fat, and hideous, poor girl, has now a companion, a slender, exquisite creature, the sombre hues of whose gown throws out the delicate fairness of her flesh.

Cecilia perhaps has never looked so lovely. Always colourless, she is to-night a little paler than usual; her hazel eyes are gleaming, and there is in them a touch of repression, of expectation that enhances their brilliancy.

Some one comes up to her, addresses her, and all at once the pallor fades, and a soft and delicate flush springs to life upon her cheeks. Her lips part in a happy smile; her eyes dilate. Alas! poor Cecilia! Cecilia, who so seldom thinks—who has no thought now of the many eyes upon her, save two only, and they are eager enough to satisfy any one; Cecilia, who has no fear or knowledge of the road on which she has already set her dainty feet.

"How charming Mrs. Gaveston looks with a colour," says Mrs. Chance. "And how seldom she has one. It is quite a pleasure to look at her *now*. I think Captain Stairs should be accorded a vote of thanks for giving us such a delightful idea of her."

Sir Stephen seats himself in a low chair just behind her. This gives her the most extreme satisfaction. In time, after all, even against such heavy odds, she *may* win. And to be Lady Wortley! To be able to step upon and crush to the earth the detested Maria, would be worth a world of dissimulation. Nell is somewhere near, and still Sir Stephen lingers with her—and Alec, too! By-the-bye, what on earth does the latter mean by lagging here instead of strengthening his cause with her? Has he already tired! This thought annoys her, but it has its antidote. Perhaps the girl is not so dangerous as she believes—a little chit like that, with just a saucy nose, and a saucier eye—pshaw! there is not so much to fear after all. Her spirits rise. What is Sir Stephen going to say? Nothing about herself it seems, after all; rather about the thorns in her flesh.

"That is twice, I think," says he pleasantly, in a low tone heard by her alone, a tone that savours of confidential discourse and thus delights her, "that you have insinuated something against Mrs. Gaveston." His manner is quite kind and nice.

"*I?* Insinuated?" Bella gives him a sweet but reproachful glance.

"Well, it sounded like it. I daresay you didn't mean it. Of course I can see now that you didn't; but people seem to have got into a way of running her down. Haven't you noticed it? It's because she's so pretty, perhaps."

"Perhaps," says Bella, bearing this better than could be expected. "Yes, I have noticed it, ever since Captain Stairs' return. I am sure there is no truth in that dreadful idea, but——"

"Well?" impatiently.

"I think, perhaps, she and her sister are people with whom one should be very guarded in one's relationships. Dear Stephen, I hope you will not think me unkind, or in any way censorious. I have, I assure you, quite an *admiration* for Mrs. Gaveston, and also for dear little Nell, who probably will, after a time, grow more earnest, less volatile, and er—fast. I mean—(the latter is an odious term)—just at present she is, don't you think?"—her little hesitation coming on again—"just a very little, eh?"

"I might perhaps," says Wortley, smiling, "if I knew what it is you want to say."

"Ah! well, no matter. Better *suppress* the unkind word always, however well deserved; and it is only to you, a cousin, I would so speak. But of course, you will understand my anxiety where Alec is concerned, his evident, most open admiration for her——"

"You should not make yourself unhappy too soon," says Sir Stephen calmly. "There is always hope. She may refuse him!"

He says this without the smallest sign of feeling, but in reality his heart sinks. There doesn't seem to be very much hope in that direction.

He is quite unaware of it, but he has said the one thing that could most annoy and disquiet the amiable Bella.

"And so break his heart," cries she in subdued tones. "You must indeed think her a determined coquette to expect such a termination as that. And no doubt you are wiser than I am; *you* can see through her, whereas I can only judge from the surface. A coquette, you call her?" this in a slightly raised tone for Mrs. Wilding's benefit, who is now passing them bound on a voyage of discovery to the tea room—"yes, yes, you are right!"

"I don't think I called Miss Prendergast anything," says Sir Stephen in a somewhat annoyed tone, but Mrs. Wilding has gone on, and fails to hear him. "I should not presume to do so——"

"Although you are in a sense her guardian?" says Mrs. Chance. "You," with a little laugh, "*might* call her to account."

"You mistake our relations when you suggest that," says Wortley. "There is only one thing I ever thought of calling her." He pauses, and Bella fixes her eyes on his in a sort of dumb terror. The fixity of her regard makes him consider his words, and all at once he sees the significance of them, the—the *truth* of them.

"And that?" asks Mrs. Chance in a low tone.

"A mere thought not worth repeating," says he, so indifferently, that she feels reassured. Perhaps it was something opprobrious! At this moment Maria, in a distinctly shabby old velvet gown, looms on the hori-

zon, and Mr. McNamara, gathering up his limbs in wild haste, prepares for flight.

"Here comes the Boss—I'm off," says he.

It is the signal for flight—soon this corner of the banquet-hall is deserted.

Mrs. Wilding, who had been the first to see and run, has by this time reached the end of the room where Nell is now sitting, Manners beside her. The instinct of mischief prompts her to bend over Nell's chair and whisper to her:

"Someone has been calling you a coquette."

"I don't care," says Nell laughing, "I've been called even a cabbage before this—only it was *chou*. Then it doesn't sound so bad in French."

"Ah, but—I'd have it out with him if I were you."

"Out where," mockingly, "in the garden?"

"For choice, yes," says Mrs. Wilding, who likes Nell, and dislikes "Mis'Chance," as she calls Bella. She had lived all her earlier years in the West Indies, and had had a good deal to do with Negroes and their little ways; and this seems to her quite a happy name for Bella, whom she dislikes. She likes Nell, however, and feels sure if the girl were to bring Wortley to book over this little affair, many happy consequences might accrue. "Nothing like a garden for a row!"

"But who am I to scold?"

"Ah! you know, you know! *Not* Mr. Grant, anyway. But Mr. Grant has a cousin"—she hesitates, shrugs her shoulders. "And a sister," says she with a faint grimace. Then this extremely vulgar young woman bends even lower and places her lips near Nell's ear. "Ten men can bring a horse to water, but one cannot make him drink; I pity 'Mis'Chance.'"

Now all this, if clear to Mrs. Wilding, is Greek to Nell, who is blind to the fact that Bella has set her mind on being Lady Wortley, and indeed, if it were known to her, it would hardly have given her a second thought. But what she does understand is, that Sir Stephen had called her a coquette, and to Mrs. Chance. To tell the truth, this rather amuses her than otherwise, but that idea of Mrs. Wilding's to have it out with him is good. She has often wished to have it out with him about many things.

She looks up over her shoulder to give an answer to Mrs. Wilding, but that mischievous creature has disappeared, and instead, she meets Grant's eyes gazing into hers.

"Come into the garden, it is lovely there," says he. He has edged in between Manners and her, and there is entreaty in his voice and gaze. She thinks for a moment before replying. Perhaps this will be one way of having it out with her stern guardian. She has an undefined feeling that he objects to her intimacy with Grant. No doubt, she thinks scornfully, because Alec is not well off. Sir Stephen's whole mind seems bent on money! As if money meant anything at all.

"Is there a garden?" asks she. She doesn't know much about Mr. Nobbs' resources.

"A small but enchanting one."

"Impossible to lose one's way?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

At this they both laugh, and Nell, rising, accompanies him to the open window of the villa that leads to the ground beneath, by means of a step or two. She has the satisfaction of passing by Sir Stephen as she goes.

"I hear the garden is so pretty," says she, smiling at him.

"It isn't a howling wilderness," returns Wortley pleasantly, "but I'd advise you to take a cloak with you. A heavy mist is falling."

"Oh, how lovely!" says she. "Perhaps at last I shall feel cool."

Indeed the room inside had grown oppressively warm. Out here it is delightful. The little pleasure ground is lit with crimson lamps—beyond is the little tennis ground. And here is the little garden filled with moonbeams, that put the Chinese lamps to shame. It is all *very* little.

"Isn't it like Nobbs!" says Grant, sneering at his host in the most unhandsome way, considering how very happy he is at the present moment. "Not a big stretch in the whole thing. Come and sit down here."

Here is another "little!" a mere tiny toy of a summer-house, made of pine logs, and thatched with heather, and with a cosy corner at the end of it.

"It looks a stupid place," says Nell, peering into it.

"It looks like snails and things. Ugh! I'd be afraid to sit down here."

"Not with *me*?" says Grant.

Nell—it is very dark—conceals her laughter successfully.

"Oh, I forgot," says she. "Of course, you are a soldier, I—perhaps I—might venture with *you*."

"Oh, I say, what rot!" says Grant. "Here, come on——" He catches her hand, and she follows him into the summer-house. Having caught her hand, he holds it.

"Nell," says he, squeezing the little hand tightly, "I——" he stops, and tries to see her face in the dim light, but the shadows are too much for him, and her face remains a mystery. "You don't mind my calling you Nell, do you?"

"Oh, no," says Miss Prendergast calmly. "All my friends call me Nell, and you are my friend too, aren't you?"

"You know very well I am," says Grant. "And more than that. "If"—he pauses—"if *every* one calls you Nell, I wish I might be allowed to call you something else. I'd like to give you a name that no one else gives you. May I? Can I?"

"But it's so limited," says Nell.

"It isn't. I've asked and I know your real name is Penelope. Can't I call you Pen?"

"If you think it nicer than Nell," says she. "But for my own part, I think Nell is the better of the two; though after all, perhaps not. Pen! To pen, to write, means *life*—but Nell—*knell*, that sounds like death and the grave!"

"True, true," agrees he eagerly. "Then it shall be Pen. And that will be a name all to ourselves."

Nell looks at him, her eyes thoughtful, meditative.

"That would be selfish, wouldn't it?" says she. "Other people might care to know that I have another name that doesn't sound like the crack of doom."

"Still——"

"We'll let it be an open question," says Nell sweetly. "I'll think over it. And it really doesn't matter at all——"

"It does—it does," says Grant. "I want to speak to

you, but you are always *going*—you're going *now*," catching her dress.

"I'm not indeed," says Nell, who after all, had only been extricating a bit of lace from the nail in the seat.

"Well, listen, then," says he, still holding her, however, as if not sure of her. "The other day at that tournament, you said I could not give you your frocks and hats."

"I said that! You must be dreaming"—indignantly.

"Well, you said something tantamount to it. But I could—*soon*. I'm bound to get on. I could give you those, and more in two years. I could give you——" he breaks off, and then goes on again. "It's no use talking about *that*. That's *done*. I have given you all I have already, and all I *am*. You know that."

There is a long pause. Nell has drawn back a little into the farthest corner of the "cosy," and is wondering by what means flight may be made honourable to her. Grant is still holding her hand, and as she gets to the end of the bench, succour seems at an end. She feels imprisoned, caught!

"Won't you speak?" says Grant. "I want only one word. I give you everything—won't you give me——"

Suddenly Miss Prendergast springs to her feet; a little sharp cry of fear escapes her.

"Oh! there are earwigs here," cries she, springing towards the opening of the summer house, and beginning to shake her dress violently. "I felt one, I know I did! Oh, what a *horrid* place! Do let us hurry back to the house, Mr. Grant, *do*. I hear they pinch badly, and they are so ugly too. Did they"—anxiously, most anxiously, and with distressed, flickering eyelids—"did they pinch *you*?"

CHAPTER XXV.

"Oh, thou unfaithful, still as ever dearest,
That in thy beauty to my eyes appearest,
In fancy rising now to re-awaken,
My love unshaken."

SHE runs gaily along the little gravelled path until she comes to the light of the lamps streaming through all the windows, Grant following.

He is feeling a little angry with her, especially as he can see that she is smiling. Suddenly, however, her smile changes, and her steps grow more decorous. Upon a bench, in the full glare of the light, Cecilia is sitting, Philip Stairs beside her.

"Is that you, Cissy?" says Nell, hoping Cecilia had not seen her little rush of a moment ago. Cecilia might not like it; when people are married, they are very particular, according to Nell, who thinks she knows so many things.

Cecilia, however, had not seen her, or anything else, or thought of anything, except the exquisite beauty of the night, and the joy of being out here—just *here!*"

"Yes," cries she, in a low voice, that strikes Nell as being so full, so rich, so inexpressibly happy. She lifts one hand and wafts a kiss to her sister from her finger tips, and Nell wafts her one back again.

"What friends Cecilia and Phil are," says Nell lightly, as she and Grant go on to the house.

"Evidently," says Grant in a leisurely sort of way, who has had many things beaten into his brain by Bella.

Bella herself is standing at the window as they go in, with Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who has all the air of an advanced crusader about her.

"Mrs. Gaveston is not here to-night?" says she when the first salutations have gone by between her and Nell.

"Oh, yes; she is," says Nell.

"I shouldn't have thought so," says Maria, growing bigger and her voice more bass. "I haven't *seen* her anywhere."

"Well, you couldn't see her here," answers Nell innocently, who hasn't the faintest notion of what she is insinuating. "She is out there," pointing delicately towards the garden. Grant groans inwardly.

"Oh, *indeed!*" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "She will catch cold, I should think. To be in the open air for three-quarters of an hour, at this time, even in the depths of summer, is more than most people are equal to."

"Perhaps she is studying the stars," says Bella, with quite a funny little smile, that makes her brother long to strangle her. "Students of *nature* forget so many things."

"I don't think she is so learned a person as you imagine," says Nell, who thinks Mrs. Chance's manner impertinent, but does not know why, "and she is not studying anything, for the matter of that. She is sitting on the bench outside there"—with a little gesture—"with Captain Stairs."

It is so direct, so openly expressive of ignorance of all that has been hinted, that even Mrs. Cutforth-Boss—who is a stern moralist, and a most uncompromising enemy—gives away.

"That girl is either a knave or a fool!" says she in a hurried whisper to Bella. "For choice—Fool!"

She departs on another mission forthwith.

"The garden seems to have charms," says Mrs. Chance to Nell, with her prettiest smile. "You have been there too."

"Yes. Haven't you?" asks Nell.

Now, no one had asked the fair widow "to view the landscape o'er" from the lamplit garden, and therefore this question of Nell's enrages her.

"No," says she, promptly. "Stephen"—she pauses, fearing to see a change in the girl's face, but change there is none. To Nell—Sir Stephen, so far, is nothing save a most disagreeable guardian! "Stephen wanted me to go out, but I am so afraid of—" She pauses meaningly.

"Chills?" suggests Nell.

"Oh, no. Public opinion!"

Here Mrs. Wilding, who is listening, and who has Mickey at her elbow—Mr. McNamara having discovered

that life (for the next hour or so) is not worth living unless Mrs Wilding lives it with him—in the most decorous sense, of *course*—put in a word or two:

"Public opinion must be a bad lot," says this dauntless young woman, "if it can't let two or three people walk about in the moonlight, without having furniture thrown at them."

Mrs. Chance looks at her with a gentle regard.

"Furniture is a good word," says she, "if a little American—Public opinion comes to two words, and good ones also! Both cost the *losers* of them a great deal." She turns back to Nell, and almost imperceptibly draws her farther into the recesses of the curtains. "Sir Stephen thinks much of public opinion," says she. "Although you would hardly think so. He is very—very——" Her hesitation comes on again here. "You have noticed?"

"What?" Nell's eyes now, in turn, demand answer from her.

"Oh, you *know*! He is very particular about certain things. Sobriety of conduct, and so on. He——"

"You seem to me to describe a prig," says Nell, who is growing a little interested.

"Ah! you are so young," says Bella radiantly. "What a dear girl you are! So sweet! so——" vaguely—"Impossible, but Sir Stephen—I am afraid he hates the 'impossible'! He wants——"

"Really, I don't care what he wants," says Nell; she makes a little swift movement of her young arm that puts the curtain to one side, and lays bare the room. She lays bare too (though really they *have* their clothes on), McNamara and Mrs. Wilding, who are evidently choking over some new joke. "You may regard him as a god, if you like, but to me, he is——"

She pauses.

"Yes?" says Bella, who can see Sir Stephen just behind her, though Nell cannot. "He is——" she pauses.

"Cross and disagreeable!" says Nell. She stops and then repeats herself with even greater force. "He is the crossest person that ever *I* met," she says with conviction.

Mrs. Chance moves away, brushing by Wortley, and

by a word carrying him with her. He had heard Nell's answer, and was therefore easily taken anywhere.

Mrs. Wilding, turning to McNamara, makes a disgusted gesture.

"That girl isn't worth anything!" says she. "What a fool to give herself away like that, and he listening."

"She didn't know he was listening."

"That makes her the bigger fool! One, nowadays, if one is a *one* at *all*, has ears at the back of one's head, instead of in the silly, natural fashion we've been brought up to believe in. Our forefathers have much to answer for. With thought they could have turned our ears both ways. Consider what advantages we should have gained by that! What knowledge of our neighbours! Their *real* opinions would be worth many millions. Poor old Nell! I wish she hadn't said that, and to that woman of all others, who will certainly make mischief out of it."

"She only used the word 'cross.' That really means nothing—to nobody. But Mrs. Chance is not nobody. With her that simple word will be developed into that 'ill-tempered brute!'"

"It sounds like her," says Mr. McNamara gloomily. "She's always saying something that gets one's back up. She's troublesome!—can't keep off the grass, ye know."

"Oh, yes, *I* know!" Mrs. Wilding looks round. "She's gone now, anyway."

"And may the ——" Mickey mutters something in sound, good Irish, and what he means to be *sotto voce*, but which sends Mrs. Wilding (who ought to know better) into silent convulsions.

* * * * *

But out in the garden here, under the silent stars, no venomous words are to be heard. The sweet and generous night is spreading its riches all abroad, and from the little garden over there, a gentle wind is bringing dainty perfumes from the drowsy flowers. A most delicate darkness has settled down on lawn, and walk, and shrubbery, but overhead the sky is bright with innumerable stars.

The quiet of the hour has fallen on Stairs: Sitting out here with Cecilia beside him, the present seems sud-

denly to vanish away, and the past to live again. He had heard many things since his return—had listened with apparent carelessness to passing references to Cecilia, whilst his whole heart and soul were on fire.

And every idle word had told him that his pretty girl, the girl he had left with soft eyes, full of unconscious love for him, had been most cruelly betrayed.

There could be no last, lingering doubt about it. She had been hurried into marriage, with a man old enough to be her father, and in no way congenial; she had been thrust into his arms against her will—a gentle, frightened, bewildered victim. At times when this knowledge grew upon him he used to curse the dead memory of her mother, but always, *always* he exonerated Gaveston.

It would indeed be impossible to look on that honest, upright gentleman, and not know at once that treachery of any sort would be beyond him; that truth unswerving was his watchword, and that death itself would be preferable to disloyalty of any kind.

He *too* had been betrayed—perhaps more basely than either Cecilia or he, Stairs!

He turns suddenly, and looks at Cecilia—how silent she too has grown! Mrs. Gaveston is leaning forward—her elbows on her knees, her chin sunk into the palms of her hands. She is smiling as if at some inward memory, and her eyes, staring straight before her into the darkness, are smiling too. It strikes Stairs with a shock of horrible joy, that never since his return—since his second meeting with her, has she ever looked so happy—so *content*!

As though feeling his fixed regard, she turns slowly to him, her eyes still smiling, her air full of half-awakened meaning. What meaning?

"Cecilia," says he suddenly—hoarsely.

"Yes?" she bends towards him eagerly—expectantly. Her eyes seem to entreat him.

"Why—*why* did you not wait?" exclaims he in a low, but passionate tone. As he speaks he moves—though not to touch her—and all at once the spell is broken.

She springs to her feet.

"Wait—wait!" cries she gaily. "Why should I wait?—and for what? For you?" she laughs lightly, "you never told me to wait."

"Not in words!" says Philip, hardly knowing what he says.

"Ah! words!" she laughs again, a little feverishly. "Words are so important. You forgot that. Oh! how cold it is getting, come in—come! Why, *how* you look——" her laughter has grown mocking now, as laughter will when it comes from a miserable breast. "What are you thinking of?"

"I don't know. Of what should I be thinking? Why should you ask?" says he with the expression of a man just roused from happy dreams to the knowledge of actual wretchedness. "You are right—let us go in."

As they go, stepping into shadows here and there, a huge white stone marking; a corner is unseen by Cecilia—her foot coming against it she stumbles slightly, and Stairs with an impulsive gesture catches her hand.

"Oh!" says she.

"You are not hurt?"—his hand is holding hers as in a vice.

"No—no. But how fortunate you caught me. I—was falling—I think——"

She stops short. Her hand is still in his. Their eyes meet

Cecilia's face is ghastly as she steps into the drawing-room a moment later. Luck that so seldom attends her is, however, with her now. No one is near—no one sees her, as with a sign to Stairs to go, she sinks into a chair in the recess of the window.

A mild little woman with a face like the placid sheep—a cousin of Nobbs—"who is at present chaperoning me, te-he-he"—is singing "Home, sweet Home" with *many* variations—and in a style that she evidently flatters herself would give Madame Patti cause for thought—as indeed it would!

This is apparently taken by the guests as a polite hint to seek their own "sweet homes," as one by one they all have risen, and are only waiting for the termination of the bravuras, to bid their host "Good-night."

It is soon done. Farewell has been said by all.

"Partin' is such sweet sorrow," shrieks Mr. Nobbs in his shrill treble as Nell disappears in the darkness.

Nell waves her hand to him gaily, and then sinks back in her corner of the brougham. Cissy, for a wonder,

does not seem inclined for conversation, so Nell perforce falls back on her own thoughts. They run here and there, always stopping, however, at one point. Sir Stephen had not spoken to her once to-night!

"*What a temper that wretched man must have!*"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Yet still there whispers the small voice within."

"Give me to drink mandragora,
That I may sleep away this gap of time."

"I WANT to go down to the beach and catch crabs," says Geoffrey.

"So you can, when your tutor has left," says his father.

"The tide will be in then," says Geoffrey discontentedly.

An under-master from the school below comes daily up to Gaveston Park to teach the little heir of that delightful old place his three R's. An hour each day is all that is insisted on, but it must be confessed that Geoffrey is an arrant idler—that Nell is another—and that ever since the latter's appearance on the scene of Geoffrey's life almost every day has been a holiday for that youngster.

"It will be out some other day," says Gaveston, who is reading his paper. Breakfast is over, but still Cecilia and Nell are lingering at the table running through their letters, and the few little sealed packets the post has brought.

Geoffrey finding this last remark hardly to his taste sidles up to his mother.

"Tell Papa to give me a holiday," whispers he. Cecilia looks up from her letter, and bringing him close to her, presses his pretty head against her shoulder.

"So *many* holidays!" says she in a whisper too.

"What's that?" asks Gaveston, looking up, with a slight touch of irritation. He is in the middle of Mr.

Gladstone's last speech at Edinburgh, and is in a fine state of irritation. The word "holiday" has come to him across his indignation, and makes him a little impatient. The very unusual frown that sits upon his forehead makes him look older, and the sun most unkindly is shooting a gleam at him that strikes directly on the slight baldness of his head.

"He wants a holiday," says Cecilia indifferently. The indifference is so strange that the boy edges closer to her, and looks up. Why doesn't she *ask* Pappy to give him one——? She always used to——!

"No—no—no! Really it is always holidays," says Peter. Then all at once the frown disappears, and he nods at Geoffrey fondly—the disappointment on the little face has touched him. "No holiday to-day, old man."

"But why not to-day?" asks Geoffrey aggrieved.

"The simplest reason. Because you had one yesterday."

"But that's a long time ago," says Geoffrey, with such unmistakable signs of woe, that Nell, seeing his mother still silent, though always pressing the close-cropped head against her bosom—and wondering at her—comes to the rescue herself.

"This one more day, Peter?" says she coaxingly. "We'll be good from this day out, he and I, we'll study and study, until our brains crack—won't we, Geoff? Come now, Peter, give us this one day; pity the poor little school-boy!"

"*Poor* little school-boy indeed," says Peter, with kindly contempt. "I believe there is no one on earth to be envied so much as a school-boy. A school-boy has but one duty in the world—to prepare his lessons for next day; and this, not being his own master, he must do—there lies the comfort of it—and though he may approach the task with loathing, still, once done, he feels the glow of a good conscience, and knows he can hold up his head with any man. Come now, Geoff, you want to hold up your head, don't you?"

"I don't! I want to catch crabs," says Geoffrey with a half mutinous, half mischievous glance at his father over his shoulder.

Gaveston and Nell burst out laughing.

"See how you've brought him up," says Peter to his wife. "I have my doubts about the clearness of your own conscience after that."

Cecilia glances at him strangely for a moment; then she laughs, but her laughter leaves something to be desired in it.

"Perhaps I haven't one—good or bad," says she. She pushes the boy gently from her. "There go, prepare your lessons."

There is a note of regret in her tone, and Gaveston suddenly relents.

"Do you want him to have a holiday?" asks he, looking at Cecilia—prepared to yield indeed, knowing that Cecilia's views of life as it should be lived, would mean perpetual holidays for everyone. And certainly there had been a pained note in her voice.

"Just as *you* like," says Cecilia slowly, not looking at him. "You shall decide."

The answer is so unexpected, so unlike Cecilia, who never hesitates about gaining her own point, that they all stare. The child most of all.

"Oh! mamma!" cries he, rushing to her and precipitating himself again upon her breast. "And you *used* to be good to me."

"I *am* good to you, Geoffrey, I *will* be good to you, always—always!" holding the child to her. She rises abruptly to her feet. Her face is very white. "Give him his holiday, Peter."

There is something almost tragic in her gaze. It seems indeed as though she had forced herself to make this small request. As though the asking of it is terrible to her.

"That is a command!" says Gaveston slowly. And, indeed, perhaps it had sounded more like that than a request! "Kiss your mother, Geoff, and then go and catch your crabs." Gathering up his papers, he leaves the room.

"Now not another holiday for a month, do you hear?" says that scapegrace's mother, in a quicker tone than usual. "Not one, mind! You hear? You will promise not even to ask for one?"

"Yes—yes—yes," cries he joyfully. "Nellie, come down to the shore with me."

"Presently—not just yet. In an hour," says Nell, following Cecilia to her sitting-room. "Go and feed your guinea-pigs first, and send a message to your tutor, to say you will not want him to-day. You should not let him take the long walk up here for nothing."

"No, of course, so inconsiderate," says Cecilia, who had not thought about it before. "Really," as the boy's footsteps can be heard running down the hall, "he gets too much liberty. But it is so hard to refuse him anything, isn't it?"

"He's a darling," says Nell.

"He's an angel," says his mother, and believes it. "Peter can refuse him, however."

"Peter is right, though," says Nell. "He ought to learn his lessons."

"Yes, I know. But—Peter is a little difficult, don't you think? If it came to a tug of war now, I shouldn't like to be on the side against Peter."

Nell clasps her hands behind her head, and laughs gaily.

"My word, if it came to a tug between you and Peter, I'd back you," says she.

"That's sporting language," says Cecilia with a little *moue*, "and your guardian objects to masculine women. And besides," with a quick sigh, "you know nothing about it—about Peter, I mean. He could be very hard."

"When did you find that out?"

"Ah! that's what frightens me. I haven't found it out at all; but I know it's *there*, and to be always standing on a volcano——"

"Pouf!" says Nell, flicking her fingers airily. "I only hope when I marry I'll get any one half as easy to manage as Peter. Why, you can twist him round your little finger."

"The cord that would bind any one to my little finger," raising her hand and gazing with open love at that beautiful member, "would be a mere thread—and threads are easily broken. There—never mind—sit down and let us talk over our dance."

It is now the day before that delightful occasion, and the very air seems full of it.

"Oh, I do hope it will be a success," says Nell raptur-

ously. "Not the ordinary well-gone-off sort of thing, but a regular *triumph*!"

"It will—it shall!" cries Cecilia enthusiastically. Her eyes had been a little languid—just a trifle *disillusionné* up to this, but now they are full of life again, sparkling, glowing. "I think I've seen to everything. And the band certainly is beyond reproach."

"So shall we be," says Nell, saucily. . . . "Oh, what a pity . . . you've broken that scent bottle. An old one! Oh, well, it doesn't matter. You will look lovely in your gown, Cissy, though I always think it was such a funny one for you to choose."

"Why funny?" a little sharply.

"A milkmaid! And *you*! You ought to have been a queen—a fairy one."

"A queen!—tut! I hate those stilted gowns. And a Titania means your frock up to your knees or rather, barely down to them. Peter would hardly stand that—*complaisant* as you think him."

"A milkmaid's gown won't come much lower."

"Mine will. Why, I——" she was going to say she had worn a costume of that sort some years ago, but suddenly she checks herself. Cecilia, who all her life has thought so seldom, is beginning to think now. That dress, when last she wore one like it—it was at the dance when she bade good-bye to Stairs—when first she felt his lips on hers. He had gone then without a definite word, and there had been no word later. Oh! those dreadful—*dreadful* days when she had waited, thinking he would write——

"Did you hear," says she abruptly, "that Lady Hopkins is going to give a dance later on?"

"Yes, it is to be a costume dance, too. I should like a new dress for that, especially," laughing, "as you so despise the lowly maid business. Do you remember at the Barksons' dance last year?—no, of course you don't—you weren't here—how stupid of me. But at all events Lady Mary Courley wore a most charming gown—a Bible costume of some sort."

"Yes, I heard, the Samaritan woman, I think, taken from that picture."

"No, it was *not*," says Cecilia, almost fiercely. "*Who* would dress a woman like that? It was Jephtha's

daughter. It was gorgeous and would suit me, but it would be very expensive."

"There is always Peter!" says Nell drily.

"Peter! To ask him for it! No. No. I shall not do that again."

There enters into her eyes the look they had worn when she asked for Geoffrey's holiday a while ago. There is indeed a sort of subdued horror in them that startles Nell. The girl had hitherto believed her sister to have married happily. To Nell, Peter is quite congenial, nay, more, most lovable, and, in spite of the little jars and breezes that must of necessity blow upon the married life, she had told herself that Cecilia was a fortunate woman to have met with so kindly a nature. But lately it has been growing clear to her that Cecilia in some odd, extraordinary way has always a certain *fear* of her husband. Not a fear of to-day only, but a fear that had begun at the beginning, and has grown ever since—in shade, and hardly noticeable—until now!

Cecilia had controlled herself almost immediately.

"You know," says she, with a faint, rather strained smile, "that I have sworn to keep within my allowance for the future."

"I can't understand you," says Nell, frowning slightly. "You treat that dear Peter just as though he were a guardian like that odious Sir Stephen. By-the-bye, Cissy, I haven't mentioned it before, but did you notice that night, at Mr. Nobbs', that he never once said so much as, 'How d'ye do?' to me. Very rude, I call it."

"Well, don't say, 'How d'ye do?' to him to-morrow night," says Cecilia laughing. "That will square you. By-the-bye, did you say it to him at Mr. Nobbs'?"

"No—I——"

"Nell! lies are naughty! It is plain to me that you behaved very badly to him, and he, your guardian too! Oh! Silly girl! I hope you will make up for your folly to-morrow night!"

"I!—make up! You don't know me," cries Nell. "Why——" speech suddenly fails her, and she makes for the door.

"Come back—a last word—a hint about Sir Stephen."

"A hint about the guinea-pigs would be better," says

Nell contemptuously. "I'm going to find them and Geoff." She slams the door somewhat vigorously behind her."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Come and trip it as you go,
On the light fantastic toe."

"Motley's the only wear."

THERE is a hammering on Cecilia's door.

"Cissy, are you ready! Are you *ready*? May I come in? How"—having opened the door without permission—"are you getting on? How am I looking? Does this thing suit me, after all? *Oh*, Cissy! You—you——"

The girl stops short, lost in admiration! Mrs. Gaveston as the immortal milkmaid—"Where are you going, my pretty maid?"—is a picture not to be outrivalled by any painter on earth.

"Alas! *too* pretty, Cecilia. Where *are* you going?"

"Come here, Nell. Let me look at you! *Such* a Bo-Peep! I must say she has done that gown well. I forgive her her dunning now. Stand back a bit . . . do . . . Marsham," to the maid, "isn't she perfect?"

"She is indeed, 'm," says Marsham, who, in her secret soul holds both Nell and her mistress in contempt. Not that she does not regard them with a certain affection, but with such an opportunity afforded them of "dressing up"—to go like the peasants around them! "A milkmaid! A sheep-girl!" Glorified representations of those bucolic beings, no doubt, but when there was "Queen Elizabeth and Merry Antonette to choose from! An', such a waste of one's jewels too, and the mistress with a whole lot of 'em. Why, if she—Marsham—were going to a party—it wouldn't be with a pail or a Merry Andrew thing like that, with a ribbon on the top of it, *she'd* go, but with a crown, and——"

"Look here; we're awfully late," says Cecilia, tossing about the things on her dressing-table to find something

or other. "We must hurry. Peter has knocked twice. Do you know, Nell, I think fancy balls ever so much cheaper than other ones? Look at us now, we don't want gloves! Such a saving!"

Her dress has cost thirty pounds, but she is so delightfully happy in the idea that she has saved money over this affair, by choosing a costume that does not demand gloves, that Nell, whose sense of humour is keen, refrains from laughter.

And, indeed, laughter would have been out of place, for now Cecilia has changed her mind again.

"After all, I'll take a pair of gloves with me," decides she. "Later on I may be glad of them. I hate dancing without gloves, one feels so undressed. Where is my pail?" Is that it, Marsham? Give it to me. How light. Oh, there's Peter knocking again. Come in, Peter. Come and look at me. How am I? How do I look?"

She runs to him, her face radiant. But a little way from him she stops.

"Oh, Nell, come and look at *Peter*! Isn't he perfect? A very dream."

Indeed Gaveston, as Peter the Hermit, an idea suggested by his wife on account of his name, is looking extremely handsome, if more *aged* than he should be. The long flowing robes, the white hair, the sternness imparted by the whole costume makes him, if idealized, certainly older than he is.

"And how do *I* look, Peter? Good enough to be your wife? Though I don't believe Peter the Hermit had one."

"Then he was less lucky than I am."

"What a lovely saying." She has evidently forgotten everything, the dull aching at her heart that has troubled her for many days—everything. She is standing right in the middle of the room—lovely—adorable—the admired of everyone.

"Do you know," cries she, putting her milk-pail behind her, and giving herself a graceful little draw up, "I think we are all beautiful, specially," with a happy glance at her sister, "Nell! No, Peter! Not so much as a *glance*! Come," she catches his arm and pulls him gaily to the door. "Not so much as *one*. If I let you look, it would upset your belief in *me*."

"What's my belief in you?" Gaveston has entered into the spirit of her fun.

"That I am the one glorious creation on earth?"

"Such conceit!" says Nell, pouting affectedly. After which they all go down to the ball-room, ten o'clock having already struck, and hours in the country being, as all people know, strictly kept.

Indeed, already people are arriving. Carmens innumerable, a Charles the First, a Henry the Eighth, and a Johnny Green. Tommy Stout—evidently of the same family as Johnny Green—follows at his heels, with a sister who, most erroneously believing herself to resemble Marie Stuart, has copied that lovely and most unhappy lady very closely. The string of pearls in her cap, however, has unfortunately got broken, and now the beads are tumbling down her cheeks one by one, giving the startling impression that she is weeping copiously.

Miss Wood, the famous tennis player of a decade since, a gaunt, but dauntless being, has come as "Tennis," and as she insists on taking imaginary strokes with her racket whenever she moves, she is rather a formidable person. Her sister, who couldn't walk a mile to save her life, and always tells you she is dying of dyspepsia, has come as Golf, and quite bristles with brassies, mashies, and cleeks, and is hung with patent tees and balls. The only thing she hasn't, indeed, is a caddie. She had bribed a young nephew to take the part, but at the last moment he had developed mumps, and was put to bed.

Mickey, as an Irish Peasant, is one of the successes of the evening—from his old "caubeen," to his coat all patched and torn, to his knee-breeches, that give one the terrifying impression that they won't hold together for another moment, to his *awful* brogues, he is all he ought to be. He is holding his shillelagh in the most improved fashion between his first finger and thumb, loosely, gaily, letting it twirl as it will, as if ready at any moment to break his neighbour's skull.

"Isn't Marie Stuart realistic?" says he to Nell, in a whisper, as she stands near the stairs. "On her way to the block, of course! See how the tears flow down her face. Rather upsetting, I call it. I feel quite queer. Don't you?"

"Oh, poor girl!" says Nell, seeing the broken string in Marie Stuart's cap. "I don't believe she knows."

"Your historical knowledge is a disgrace to you," says Mickey sadly. "She was *not* a girl. And she certainly knew—considerably more than she ought to have known."

"I must go and tell her," says Nell, but Mr. McNamara catches her crook, and holds her fast.

"Tell her what? That she knows more than—Penelope, would you ruin my last chance on earth? She's got a large fortune, and a lot of other things—a house in town, a shooting lodge in Scotland, and a squint!"

"Uncrook me, sir!" says Nell. And then piously, "Heaven send you sense."

"Don't say that," says Mickey imploringly. "I want it to send me *you*!"

Mrs. Chance has just arrived, looking really charming as "A Maid of all Work!" with her sleeves tucked up to her shoulders, and her muslin bib and cap. She looks quite as young as the youngest girl present—not a day older than Nell, for example. This get-up had been a concession to the useful Maria, who always keeps her eye on Mrs. Chance's extravagances, and was begun by Bella in a bitter spirit. But really when it was made and on, it delighted her so much, that she forgave most of her enemies on the spot—even Maria and all her works.

She is followed almost immediately by Philip Stairs, who looks extraordinarily handsome as Don Pedro. The dress suits his dark complexion, his dark and earnest eyes—the eyes that are now fixed upon his hostess.

All the suns of India cannot keep his face from whitening as he sees her, standing there at the head of the grand old hall, her husband—her husband!—beside her. *That gown!* He turns aside abruptly in his way up to her, and pretends to do something or other to his costume, but almost immediately he recovers himself, and goes on to her, his face an impassive mask. She receives him sweetly, indifferently, turning from him to give her hand to a newly-arrived Turk, who looks as if a mouse would frighten him. After him, however—as if to make up for his deficiencies—comes Mrs. Cut-

forth-Boss, and she does it nobly. Anyone who could look on Maria as "Cleopatra" without quailing, would be an heroic spirit indeed!

"She's too awful for anything," says Mrs. Wilding, who, as "Folly," is attracting considerable attention, especially from the knees down.

"I feel my hair rising on my head," says Mickey. "I expect the real Cleopatra in a moment—I don't believe she'll rest in her grave after this! And who on earth has she got with her?"

"A nephew, I think," says Mrs. Wilding, in an awed whisper. "I heard she was bringing a nephew. What a dreadful boy!"

And, indeed, the nephew in question leaves a good deal to be desired in the way of beauty. He is one of those unhappy youths to whom pimples seem to cling!

"What's he meant for?" asks Nell, who is standing with them, and is lost in wonder at his costume.

"My dearest child, can there be a question?" says Mickey. "Egyptian Plague, of course. Boils and blains, you know. It strikes me, Penelope, you don't read your Bible as often as you *might*, or I shouldn't have had to explain this to you. So clever of Cleopatra to bring him along like this. Keeps up the idea, you see. Pure Egyptian arrangement all through—Cleopatra and Plague."

"I hope he isn't catching," says Mrs. Wilding.

"There's Sir Stephen," says Mickey suddenly.

Wortley, indeed, has just come into view. He has stopped to talk to "The Maid of all Work," who is beaming her sweetest smiles upon him. Nell looks at him curiously. What is his costume? Not Mephistopheles, at all events! King John, is it?

"The widow has designs on him," says Mickey. "See how she blinks. Nell, you ought to keep your eye on your guardian."

"Rather!" says Mrs. Wilding. "If 'Mis-Chance' becomes Mrs. Guardian, I don't envy *you*, my dear Nell! What a little shifting way she has. I can't endure her, can you?" to Mickey.

"German silver," returns that young man, briefly but forcibly.

"Have you heard how Miss McGregor is coming?"

asks he presently, when they have discussed a few more of the dresses present.

"No," simultaneously from both, and then from Mrs. Wilding:

"Venus! I shouldn't wonder."

"Wrong. Lemon Peel!"

"Nonsense!"

"It's always 'Nonsense,' it seems to me, when I speak," says Mr. McNamara indignantly. "Wait till you see, that's all. Very clever idea on her part, I think! Saves such a lot of expense. No get-up required. Comes quite simply—*Au naturel!* ye know."

"Why, there she is over there," says Nell quickly, pointing to Miss McGregor, who has just come in, dressed very charmingly as a "grandmother" of the fifteenth century, and looking, for her, admirably well. The powder and rouge have done wonders for her sallow complexion, and her naturally fine eyes are shining bravely.

"What dreadful stories you do tell, Mickey! Where's the lemon peel now?"

"In the claret cup, I hope," says Mr. McNamara unabashed. "I say, she ought to hurry up and be a grandmother as soon as ever she can—the cast seems to suit her."

"She is really quite a nice girl!" says Mrs. Wilding, who must be talking, "so nice that one hates saying a word against her. But one can't help being sorry that she is so ugly and fat."

"That's saying it anyway," says Mickey maliciously. "'Plump and plain'—do you mean?"

Here someone claims Mrs. Wilding for the first quadrille, so Mickey is spared annihilation for the moment. There is a move towards the ball-room.

The Lord-Lieutenant of the county has just arrived, and Cecilia has taken the head of the room with him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Sweet peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave,
Let me once know.
I sought thee in a secret cave,
And asked, if peace were there.
A hollow wind did seem to answer 'No!
Go, seek elsewhere.'"

AND now the first quadrille is over, and the evening well begun.

Stephen Wortley, standing by a window, is looking at Bo-Peep, who is dancing with the Irish Peasant.

"And oh! she dances such a way,
No sun upon an Easter day
Is half so fine a sight."

Her feet—and they are quite conspicuous—are not in the least like "little mice" however. They are dainty, slender little members and no more.

Wortley watching them, feels inclined to laugh. What a child she is—how gay! What a thorough appreciation of the joys of life is hers. How she *does* delight in this dance with Mickey, who, being an Irishman, dances, if not gracefully, at all events, delightfully, and with his whole heart. Wortley can see that the girl is enjoying herself with him, yet no thought of jealousy connected with Mickey enters his head. As he has told himself before, it would take a genius to be jealous of Mickey!

He watches her, smiling faintly. She and McNamara have paused for a moment or two, and the pretty head is uplifted to Mickey's. The latter has evidently said something that amuses her, because she laughs a little, and makes the tiniest little movement, that if accentuated or done by anybody less dainty, would have meant a push. Mickey laughs back to her, taking the pretty push as a joy.

Sir Stephen takes a step towards her, then checks himself. He had not forgotten that impulsive "Every-

one *knows* I hate Sir Stephen," uttered to McNamara. He had not forgotten either what she said to Mrs. Chance, to Bella, who is looking so uncommonly well to-night, and in that queer get-up too. No money, poor woman—no doubt——

His thoughts, kindly always, wander to Bella for a moment or two, and then come back again. *She* had called him "cross" to Bella, what a detestable word!

It seems to him that he must be doomed to hear things not intended for him. Twice he had heard! Once in a life-time is surely enough for any man to secretly hear things tending to his own overthrow, but his ward had supplied him with two occasions.

This makes him smile, but the smile has very slight hilarity in it and fades almost at its birth. It was indeed a cynical smile at best, and had no amusement in it whatever.

"Everyone knows I hate Sir Stephen!"

Could that charming, laughing face over there hate anyone! Pshaw! She couldn't have meant it. Both calumnies may go whatever road they like.

As for him (he is quite under the spell of her charm now), he will go to her, demand a dance, and risk a refusal. He and she have scarcely spoken since that last day on the beach when he had refused to let her make inroads on her small fortune.

He moves, and as he does so, with his eyes always on his pretty ward at the other end of the room, it so happens that she looks up. Their eyes meet.

It is quite a journey from here to there, but to Sir Stephen, who has suddenly grown a little absent, it seems but a step. The result is that he comes heavily in contact with "Cleopatra," and almost bears that august lady to the ground. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss is one of those people a little difficult to assuage in times of trouble, so that it takes quite a minute or two for Wortley to assure her of his regret, and to get on his way again.

But now he has escaped from Maria's anathemas, and is steadily fighting his way towards her. It so happens that at this moment, Mrs. Wilding with her partner, has stopped quite close to Nell, and having drawn Mickey into an argument, leaves the former virtually alone as Sir Stephen reaches her.

"Is it peace?" asks he, in a low tone and with a half smile. There is certainly a cry for grace in his whole air, and Nell, who had seen him coming, and had been making up frightful little speeches for him, pauses.

"What a quotation!" says she at last, plucking at the ribbons of her crook, and with her eyes downheld. "Have I ever slain anyone?"

"I leave that to your conscience," says Sir Stephen lightly. His lightness offends her. They are not on such terms as all *that* comes to!

"I am glad you admit I have one," returns she pointedly, taking another step upon the war-path, and raising her glance to his.

"What is it you have *not*?" says he, his tone still half jesting. But there is a light in his eyes as they meet hers, that slowly and, in spite of herself, brings a warm colour to her cheeks.

"Well," repeats he presently, "is it peace?"

"A truce—perhaps," says she.

"Ah, well! Half a loaf is better than no bread."

"A poor sentiment!" She tilts her chin, and glances at him from under her long scornful lashes. The little *air mutin* she has assumed, sits sweetly on her.

"I am poor all through," says he. "I have fallen out of your good graces. But you, who are rich in everything, might show some mercy."

It is a rather unfortunate remark, and he at once knows it, but too late. Her eyes grow cold and distant once again.

"You forget!" says she. Her tone is very low and distinctly antagonistic. "You have been the one"—slowly—"to prove to me how very far from rich I am."

"Miss Prendergast," says Wortley hurriedly, "can't you try to forget how we stand towards each other? Do you think I have not suffered too? Can't we leave that one bone of contention alone, and be—friends at least? If I were to do the thing you want, it would be at the expense of my honour, and I don't think you ought to ask that."

"I ask nothing," says Nell—but her voice is softer now, and her eyes more earnest.

"That puts me very far away," says he. "And it sounds unforgiving, too, doesn't it? May I——" he

pauses, and one of the ribbons on her crook floating his way, he takes it, and twines it round his finger. "May I ask *you* for something?"

"My opinion as to the suitability of your costume?" Her glance, now, though very brief, is full of gaiety, and he takes his courage in both hands.

"No. A dance."

"Fancy Bo-Peep *daring* to dance with a king. She would be afraid," says Miss Prendergast. There is distinct coquetry in her eyes now, and Sir Stephen feels his cause is won.

"It is the king who trembles," says he. "This next waltz?"

"Promised."

"The dance after?"

"If——"

"Oh, no, no," hurriedly. "It is the quadrille. The ninth?"

"Promised too?" There is a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"The one after then?" desperately.

"I am afraid there is nothing till the thirteenth!"

"The *thirteenth*!" in a voice of consternation. "Well, I suppose I must be thankful for small mercies."

"You call it small!"—ominously.

"Oh, no, *great*," laughing. And then, "You *are* merciless—I may have it?"

"If you really want it."

"We needn't go into that, I think."

Again their eyes meet, and again she colours faintly.

"You won't forget, will you? Where shall I find you?"

"I leave that to you," says Nell, at which they both laugh, and peace of a sort seems to be restored.

"Is my costume correct?" asks he presently. Mickey and Mrs. Wilding having now entered on a violent argument.

"It looks quite right, I think," taking him literally.

"Does it suit my character, I mean?"

"Ah! your character! What should I know of that?"

"You told me once you had an idea or two about it. You even suggested that you knew what I ought to

wear. I thought over Mephistopheles, but came to the conclusion that the cruel guardian suited me better. You agree with me?"

"Perfectly! I had thought of you as Richard the Third, however, rather than John."

"I considered that too," unmoved. "But I came to the conclusion that a hump is inartistic. And I was too tall for the part. I tried to make out a costume that would represent the wicked uncle, who made away with the 'Babes in the Wood,' but I couldn't make it realistic enough. And on the whole I really think King John's conduct towards his nephew leaves little to be desired in the way of brutality. He was as bad a guardian as one could think of. I felt sure," regarding her calmly, "I was choosing a character you would think entirely suitable—that you would entirely approve of—for me!"

Here Mickey, having been worsted by Mrs. Wilding with great slaughter, turns back to Nell, and leads her away. There is only a moment for her to look at Wortley. She makes no attempt to answer or refute his accusation, but there is something that is a mingling of anger and reproach in her eyes.

"I've worn that threadbare!" says Wortley to himself. "I may have gone even a little too far. It was ungenerous, but impossible to resist."

He watches her as she waltzes lightly down the room. At the other end she stops, and so does the music a moment later. It is hardly over, however, before someone has come to claim her for the next.

It is Alec Grant.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"I love my lady's eyes
Above the beauties rare,
She most is wont to prize
Above her sunny hair,
And all that face to face
Her glass repeats of grace."

"At last!" says Grant delightedly. He is looking extremely handsome as Louis the Fourteenth—considerably better worth looking at indeed than that superb monarch

ever was. "How you have been dancing! And always so happily too—always"—reproachfully—"looking as if you were so thoroughly enjoying yourself."

"Well, so I was."

"Even with that notorious butterfly McNamara you seemed——"

"Well, why shouldn't I? I'm alway happy with Mickey. He is, perhaps, the one man I know who doesn't worry me."

"I do then?"

"Ah! *There!* That's horrid of you," with a little shake of her head. "I only meant that Mickey is such an old friend——"

"Whom you met for the first time three months ago!"

"That's horrider, as Alice would have said if she had known you. And really, I think your home ought to be in Wonderland, you expect so much."

"Not *so* much—only—a kind thought now and then."

"I don't think I ever give you an unkind one," says Nell sweetly. It is rather mistaken kindness. Grant's face flushes with delight.

"If you give me one at all—*ever*—kind or unkind—it is more than I deserve. Of course, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that—but your calling McNamara a friend—in that tone. . . ."

Miss Prendergast laughs.

"I'm sure I'd call him that in any tone," says she. "He's delightful—I may as well at once make you a confession!"

She bends towards him, her mischievous eyes sparkling.

"Shall I?" says she, as if doubting her wisdom.

"Go on," says Grant, paling.

What is she going to say—that she is engaged to that ass, McNamara.

"Well, then, I *love* Mickey!"

She laughs out loud, and draws back—laughing always. She has clenched her little teeth upon her under lip, and is regarding Grant with the naughtiest expression. That she has wilfully been making fun of him is beyond doubt. But beyond doubt too is the fact that Grant is too much in love with her to be angry with her.

"I can't bear you to say that, even in jest," says he. "To be in love with anyone—but you are not!"

"No? So sure?"

The little coquette trifles with a ring upon her finger, and finally gives him a glance.

"Yes. I am sure!" says he sadly.

"What an air!" says she, pouting. "And you are making me lose this lovely waltz too! Come, come, come!" She holds out her hands to him, and soon they are mingled with the other dancers again, stopping at last near an open window.

"Come out," says Grant impulsively. "It is a heavenly night, and the gardens are a dream in themselves."

Stepping lightly down the balcony steps, they presently find themselves in a cool realm of delight. Inside, the heat was almost intolerable, in spite of the open windows, but here there is no need to open any windows, for all the world of air is free and the night is holding a high festival.

Out here, in this cool sweet dark, one dreams of nothing but rest and stillness. Far away, down there—far down behind the darkened hills, the sound of the sea may be heard murmuring—crying always—as the sea will, as if for its loved and lost. But here there is no complaining, and only silence—a splendid silence that goes to one's very heart.

Up, over-head, the moon stands out in a glorious sky—pale, azure, unblemished, with just one star low down upon the horizon, as if to keep it company.

Nell and Grant have come to a tiny summer-house, that leaves the lovely vault of heaven clear. Both are a little touched by the night's loveliness.

"I wish——" says Grant, suddenly.

He hesitates, and looks at the pretty creature near him. So near, yet so *very* far! He pauses.

"You wish?" says Nell, so gently, so kindly, that he takes heart of grace.

"I asked you the other day to let me call you by some name that all the world does not know."

"That is so difficult," says she. She lifts her face as if pondering on the great subject. "I have only one name, after all."

"Yes, but—your full name is Penelope."

"Horrid, isn't it?" says Nell. "The family suppresses the nasty fact as well as it can. I wonder," innocently, "how *you* heard of it?"

"You know you told me," says he reproachfully. "Everyone calls you Nell, but I—you remember I asked you to let me call you Pen. But you did not seem to care for that name. And, indeed, it sounds a little stiff. But——" He grows silent as if making up his mind to a great enterprise. "Penny," says he suddenly.

"Penny!" she lifts her charming brows as if failing to understand. "Is it a bet?" asks she, "on our thoughts?—a penny for our priceless thoughts—how rude—we're better than that, aren't we?"

"You know I did not mean that. But if I might——"

"Oh, just consider," says Nell impatiently, but giving in to his persistence, "to be called a Penny. No, I could not submit to that. I have fought against it as long as I can remember anything. I believe, even in my cradle, I made a protest. Anyway, I'm not going to submit to be looked upon as a coin by anyone. And such a poor one too! But that doesn't matter—the poverty, I mean. It is the fact of being a coin I resent. Why, I might prove false at any moment——"

Again she gives him a little glance from under her lids—a provoking, delightful glance that undoes him quite, and helps her to another five minutes of perfect enjoyment.

"How would the possessor of me feel when he was dragged up to judgment on my account?" asks she. "Why, he——"

She would have gone on, but Grant breaks in almost violently:

"If the possessor were *me*," says he, "I should count it great glory to go to prison, to be exiled, or—to *die for you!*"

There is so much passion in his tone that for a moment Miss Prendergast remains silent, then she looks at him.

"You haven't an ounce of sense!" says she; she looks quite angry. She shrugs her shoulders, and otherwise treats him with contempt.

It is a contempt, however, that lasts barely a moment.

All at once she turns to him—on her lips a perfect smile.

"Don't die!" says she. "I like my friends alive!"

"If you won't have Penny, I may call you Pen, at all events," says the young man persistently.

"Oh, why not?" says the girl, with a second faint touch of impatience. "If it makes you happier to call me Pen, by all means, do so. . . . Or—or—anything else you like!"

Her manner is so subdued that he hardly recognises the fact that she is annoyed with him, yet beyond doubt, she *is* annoyed. For the first time it has dawned upon her that he is in love with her. How *tiresome* men are! She rises slowly to her feet; to get back to the house is the best thing to be done now.

"Stay a little while." Grant has risen too. "The night is lovely, and——"

"It is not more lovely than any other night," interrupts she slowly—and then all at once it comes to her that he bores her sometimes—not always, but sometimes! At this moment, at all events, she does not feel in harmony with him.

"To me far more lovely—because *you* are here!" says Grant; his manner is perhaps a trifle perfervid, but there is honest meaning in it, for all that. Miss Pendergast begins to feel a little sorry that she has granted him that permission about calling her by her Christian name. It is too late now, however, to rescind it—it would look so queer—it would make so *much* of it!

"I understand your delicate allusion," says she laughing, and making a determined effort to keep him in commonplace lines. "But for all that come in. I have promised the next to Philip Stairs, and he dances so beautifully. I would not miss it for the world."

This ought to be a damper, but Grant is beyond being offended. That she would rather go in to dance with Stairs than sit out here with him in this glorious moonlight seems quite fit and proper. He is so desperately in love that he has sunk his own personality out of sight altogether, and it takes a great deal of love to make a man do that. There is only one point in view with him now, and that is to make sure that, though not in love with him, she is not in love with anyone else either.

And Stairs—Bella has told him a good deal about Stairs' attachment to Cecilia! Still, there is no knowing—He rises and goes with her to the house.

"Stairs seems a capital fellow," says he, in what he fondly, but most erroneously, believes to be the most admiring tone in the world.

"A trifle gloomy, don't you think?" says Nell, which speech sends him up to the seventh Heaven.

"Well, a little perhaps. But I like Stairs—I do really." He feels "really" as if he *loved* Stairs at this moment. "And he is hardly gloomier than a lot of other fellows—Wortley, for example." There is again the air of the "anxious enquirer" about him.

"Is Sir Stephen gloomy? I don't know, I'm sure. I know very little about him."

There is a suggestion in her tone to the effect that she never desires to know more about him, and again Grant's heart rejoices. If her heart is quite free, as Bella always says it is, there may be a chance for him. What a clever old girl Bella is!

CHAPTER XXX.

"I dreamed it would be nameless bliss,
As I loved, loved to be;
And to this object did I press
As blind, as eagerly."

As they enter the ball-room, the dance has just come to an end. Cecilia has been dancing it with Stairs, and is now standing near the window as Nell steps through it—such an idealized Cecilia. Nell looks at her sister with a fresh current of interest. How beautiful she is! Was she as beautiful as that yesterday?

"There you are, Nell," cries she gaily. "Isn't it going off well? Isn't it the *biggest* success? Philip says it really is. Oh!" with a little satisfied sigh, "I don't know when I felt so happy!"

For a second Nell feels a reply difficult, then she smiles.

"Philip ought to be flattered; his opinion seems to be of great weight."

"Yes, doesn't it?" says Stairs laughing. "I am afraid Mrs. Gaveston gauges it too highly."

"Oh, no. I am sure not," says Nell, a little gravely, a little vaguely perhaps. A cold clutch of fear has caught her heart; she had felt it before—once before—but now, as then, she had not understood it.

"The next is ours, I think," says Stairs quietly. Perhaps he wanted to break that train of thought in her young mind.

"Yes," her reply is quite distant. She would probably have trifled with it on another occasion—as all women hate to think they give a single thought to their obligations, or appointments (especially appointments), where the other sex is concerned.

At this moment the strains of "*España*" begin to ring through the room, and Stairs, after a hurried word to Cecilia, comes to Nell's side. The girl, with this new terror awake in her heart, cannot but tell herself that there is reluctance in his coming—carefully concealed, of course, most tenderly hidden, but there had been the backward glance to Cecilia's dainty figure—and—Nell saw this, too, and whitened—a glance from Cecilia to *him*! The prettiest, sweetest glance, with only happy camaraderie in it. No more—no more—but the poor child looking on—bewildered—searching for a meaning to this fear of hers, and not knowing that she is searching, feels a little frightened.

In five minutes it is all forgotten. She is dancing with the man who is considered the best dancer in the room, and for a girl in her first season, that covers a multitude of sins. When her dance with Stairs comes to an end, she feels at peace, not only with all the world, but with him.

"Of course," as she told herself, "it had all been a silly little sort of a nightmare!"

After this the night runs swiftly, and she is almost startled to find the thirteenth dance has come, and Wortley with it.

"It has taken me all my time," says he.

This enigmatical speech naturally surprises her.

"What has?"

"The finding of you! You remember you said you would leave that to me!"

"If you expect me to remember everything that I say"—laughing—"you will find yourself mistaken. However, if in a lucid moment I did say I would leave it to you, you must confess I was not wanting in intellect. You *have* found me."

"Perhaps you regret your choice of a detective?"

"I'll tell you that—" she gives him a little quick smile—"when we have danced from here to there," she indicates a point. Wortley passes his arm round her waist, and when they have waltzed from "here to there," stops short.

"Well?" says he.

"I am not sorry," says she, breathing quickly, delightedly. After all Philip Stairs, of whose dancing one has heard so much, does not dance half as well as Sir Stephen.

"Are you tired?" asks he. This is a charming speech; it shows that he wants to dance again—that he likes her dancing.

"No. No!" and again she is in his arms; and again they have waltzed down the room and back again, stopping close to the conservatory door.

There they pause—laughing . . . drawing their breath a little quickly.

"I always thought it," says Wortley. "Now I know it."

"Know what?"

"That you are a fairy."

"Indeed, I am not."

"Nothing earthly ever danced so lightly."

"*Before* you should have added."

At this quip they laughed again.

"Isn't it delicious?" says Nell, alluding to the music. "And we are wasting it."

"No—you must rest a little while," says he, and taking her hand lightly he draws it within his arm, and carries her off to the conservatory.

In here it is deliciously cool. The lamps are covered with soft yellow shades, and all round, the stands are filled with magnificent blossoms. It is a large, oblong shaped room, and the door leading into the gardens

being open, a soft gust of wind every now and then rushes in, keeping the temperature comparatively cold, even on this sultry summer night. Through this open door comes too, a glimpse of the sky outside, bespangled with its glowing fires, and with the

“Gilded sickle of the new made moon,”

calmly shining on its breast.

The central stand is filled with roses—creamy, red, yellow, and palest pink roses—there are roses everywhere. And beyond this great bank of living beauty is a recess, with low chairs here and there, and beyond that again, a tall and glorious row of lilies, white and still as death.

“I love the lily as the first of flowers
Whose stately stalk so straight up is and stay,
To whom the lave eye lowly louts and cowers,
As bound so brave a beauty to obey.”

At their feet as doing lowly homage, are grouped some tender fragile ferns.

“How exquisitely arranged,” says Nell. She has drawn her hand from Wortley’s arm, and is moving about, looking at, and thrusting her dear little nose into, the flowers. “After all I like the roses best,” says she; “the lilies are very grand, but the roses smell much sweeter. Do you know the perfume of lilies always makes me feel a little—a *very* little—faint?”

“Come over here then,” says Stephen, drawing her away from the lilies towards a little corner where a cosy seat is arranged behind two huge flowering myrtles.

“I’ve a crow to pluck with you,” says he, when he has pulled up the cushion behind her back.

“With me? You?”

“Oh! yes! I daresay you thought you had it all your own way,” says he. “But I have something to complain of too.” He clasps his hands behind his head and regards her with a malicious expression. “I never said bad things about you, anyway.”

“What have I done now?” asks Nell. She laughs a little and blushes more. What has he heard? She is conscious of having said a very considerable number of bad things to a very considerable number of people

about him of late. Which of them has given her away? Judging from the side lights it would probably be Mrs. Chance. "Of course," with a swift glance at him from under her lids, a glance that is a veritable "thing of beauty," "A poor ward is always in fault with a guardian."

"That's mean!" says Wortley. "That's a distinct cry for mercy. But I shan't grant it, the crime is too deep for pardon. . . . What did you mean by calling me cross?"

"Cross! Oh! if *that's* all," says she reviving. "And I don't believe I did either—though," emphatically, "I might, and with cause."

"Oh! Miss Prendergast Cause! And you may not remember, but most assuredly you *did*!"

"Who says so? Of course you won't tell me *that*. But I am sure, Sir Stephen, you are clever enough to know that it is our dearest friends who are always so very glad to tell us the disagreeable things that our other friends have said about us, behind our backs, and with . . . considerable additions!"

"I don't think we must blame our friends. No one told me."

"Then you must have been listening! Oh! fie!" cries she.

Wortley laughs.

"You admit it then?" says he.

"No. No, I don't. But *you* admit something worse."

"I don't indeed, I wasn't listening. But I heard all the same."

"I remember now," says Nell quickly. "I was talking to Mrs. Chance, and she always—she—well, she," with a little movement of her arm, "puts me *out*, don't you know? And she was saying something about you, laudatory, and—well—I wanted to contradict her, and I *did*, with a vengeance. Evidently," she pauses and laughs at him, "a vengeance that is falling now."

"It doesn't seem to do much in the way of crushing you, in spite of its fall," says he. "And so the fact that Mrs. Chance said something in my favour was sufficient to make you——"

"Oh, no, no. You mustn't look at it like that. And even if I did say it, is it so very bad?"

"Bad enough! I suppose," copying her former tone, "*you* are clever enough to know that no one likes to be considered a bear!"

"Oh! I certainly never called you that. You," looking up at him with the most adorably regretful look in her face, "know I didn't—even Mrs. Chance couldn't make you think *that*. You . . . believe me?"

"Of course!" Wortley has risen to his feet, and is looking down at her. She is ten times lovelier than ever he had known her, with this quick earnest expression in her eyes. "I believe you in everything."

"And so far as recriminations go," says the girl, "I have a great deal on my side—a great deal to say to *you*."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Comfort is none, but in you, lady dear."

"HAVE you?" says Wortley. "If so, I had better sit down again. So much matter will require so much rest. I told you, you were tired a while ago! But the fatigue you felt *then* is, I am sure, nothing to the fatigue that will ensue on this argument."

"To make light of things is not to gain a point," says she. "You tell me I have been—well—unkind to you. But there have been moments when you have——"

"Been unkind to *you*! Where did those moments come in?" He pauses, and looks at her as if demanding an explanation.

"I remember, if you don't," says she, and then grows silent.

He looks at her. All the happy camaraderie that marked the beginning of their dance is now lost—gone.

"I remember that day at Lady Hopkins' tournament, when she told you to give me the prize."

"Well?"

"And you refused to do it. That was almost an insult," says the girl, colouring faintly. "You drew back. I saw you—you let Mr. Grant come forward and take your place."

"Was there no reason for my doing that?"

"Reason! What do you mean?"

"As your guardian," smiling involuntarily, and a little uncertainly, "I surely may make certain enquiries. Grant, it seemed to me, was—shall we take a sporting phrase?—first favourite with you. As for me, as you yourself once told me, I am less than nothing to you."

"I know nothing of sporting phrases," says she coldly. "And as for Mr. Grant, he is as little to me as I am to him!"

"Is that the truth?" asks Wortley. He is looking straight into her eyes. "You mean that?"

"Certainly I mean it!" She frowns slightly. "What a silly subject," says she.

"Grant?"

At this the ice gives way a little, and she laughs involuntarily.

"At all events let us change it." She pauses, then looks at him. "This dress," says she, "is it becoming? Cissy says it is—but she'd say anything. Do——" she hesitates, a moment. "Do you think I look—well—*nice* in it?"

"No," says Wortley promptly.

"Oh!" says she. She struggles with her dignity for a minute, then casts it behind her, and turns upon him—with wrath in her eyes.

"No wonder I hate you," says she.

"To me it is the greatest wonder in the world why you do hate me," says Wortley. "The wonder increases when——" He pauses and tries to catch her eye, but fails. "When I have just told you that '*nice*' is not a word that could describe you."

There is a little silence. Presently she lifts her eyes—there is animosity in them still.

"Is nasty the word then?"

"The last word in the world. Shall I tell you the right one? No? I shall, however." He laughs. "It is miserably wanting after all," says he. "But here it is—Perfection."

"Wanting! It is far *too* good," says she. She laughs back at him over her fan. "Fancy your calling me perfection! I never thought it would come to that. I always thought of you as——"

"As what?"

"Well——" She hesitates, and then decides on playing with the question. "For one thing, I thought you would be a great deal older than you are."

"I can return that compliment! I thought you would have been a 'woman grown' at least."

"Well, so I am."

"Tut—who'd believe you? What is your age, I wonder? Thirteen?"

Miss Prendergast makes a little indignant gesture.

"Why not say three, at once?" She lifts the shoulder of scorn against him, but she laughs at him over it, which equalizes matters.

Here some people come towards their flowering barricade, and amongst them Wortley notices Bella Chance; he notices also that her eyes are on Nell, and that there is something malignant in them.

And now Grant turns round the corner by the little retreat and comes straight up to Nell.

"Our dance." There is great joy and delight in his voice, and beyond all a proprietary tone that goes to Wortley's soul.

He looks quickly at Nell.

"You will give me another?" says he in a low tone.

"Yes."

The answer is calm, kindly—nothing more.

And now she is gone, disappearing through the door beyond—a little fairy of a thing with nothing to be seen of her, save the back of her charming head, and the top of her crook, as it touches the door of the conservatory, going by.

* * * * *

"I don't believe you have had any supper," says Grant, the moment he has got her out of hearing.

"No, but——"

"Well, I do think Wortley might have seen to that"—wrathfully.

"I suppose he thought I had had some."

"Oh, suppose!"—contemptuously. "Come along now, at all events, and have a bit of chicken or something. I suggest soup——"

"Oh, no! chicken."

"And jelly—and a meringue—and——"

"I don't think it would be wise to quite *clear* the table," says she reproachfully, "do you?"

"You are too conscientious! We'll try to leave the others something, however, as you wish it."

Finding a little table unoccupied, he makes her sit down, and goes about as a lover should, seeking what best and daintiest food he can get her.

Mickey at a distance watches them with admiration in his eyes.

"Now that's what I call a *real* 'follower'" says he to Mrs. Wilding, to whose excessively short skirts he has attached himself during the past two hours. "There's always something in the man who wants to feed up his girl."

"Then I think it's a most extraordinary thing that you won't get me something to eat," returns she mildly.

Grant has at last got something very nearly good enough for Nell's supper, and has now seated himself beside her, with his own plate also liberally supplied with the "nearly good enough." It seems almost too happy a thing to be having supper with her—here—to all intents and purposes alone—with their backs to the room, and nothing before them but the wall and a simpering idiot of an ancestor by Holbein to look at them, and hear them.

"I think this has been the jolliest dance I have ever been at," says he presently.

"That must be saying a good deal," says Nell, who in spite of her seeming indifference a while ago, is getting through her *mayonnaise* in very active style. "You have been to a great many in India, and at home, too, of course."

"I feel as if I had never been at one before."

"That's just what *I* feel," says Nell, giving him a languishing glance.

"Do you? Do you *really*, Pen?" He has forgotten his supper now, which is saying a good deal, and is gazing at her with passionate hope in his eyes. Miss Prendergast gives him a second little glance that now, alas! has only laughter in it.

"Why shouldn't I?" says she, "it is my first!"

"Oh, I say! That was very cruel of you," says Grant, flushing and frowning, but feeling if possible a

little more in love with her than ever. And indeed, as she, still gazing at him mischievously, laughs softly, but gaily—he laughs too.

Neither of them had known that Bella with Sir Stephen had just passed behind them.

"How they are enjoying themselves," says Bella in a whisper to Sir Stephen. "I really, *really* think she is in love with him. I expect it has been all settled this evening. Did you hear him call her 'Pen' just as we passed?"

"No!" Wortley feels his colour change. And then all at once hope springs up fresh and strong again. "Pen! why, that is not her name! It is Nell—Nell!"

He dwells upon the name as if lingering longingly over it, and Bella's voice takes a sharper tone.

"Penelope is her real name," says she, "if anything about her or her sister *can* be called real. And undoubtedly he addressed her as Pen just now."

"Shall I get you an ice?" asks Wortley in the most indifferent tone in the world, and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss calling to her to come to her at the same moment—(Maria disapproves of her "silly attempts at throwing herself at Stephen," as she expresses it)—Bella has to go to her—uttering curses not loud, but deep, beneath her breath.

Wortley thus mercifully released, pours himself out a glass of champagne. His face is as imperturbable as usual, but at soul he is bitter. Her very last words to him had been—or nearly her last—that Grant was as little to her as . . . *he* was. And yet now——"

He involuntarily glances over his shoulder to the little table, where he had just seen her sitting with Grant, laughing, whispering gaily, looking as if no situation on earth could suit her better. And Bella had heard him call her by her Christian name. I wonder how she would look if *he* called her by her Christian name! And "Pen" too, quite a secret sort of name. To the world, Nell. To Grant alone, Pen.

Pshaw! how *mad* he had been to trust her in any way. She is evidently deceitful to the heart's core! Untrustworthy all through. And yet, Bella—Bella alone had heard that word, Pen. And Bella . . . some secret instinct warns Wortley that Bella at a pinch could lie—freely and well!

There is a little universal movement in the supper-room now. Some people have risen, others are coming in. Mr. Wilding, a tall, somewhat distinguished-looking young man, seeing an opportunity, has dragged his wife into a corner.

"For goodness' sake, pull down your skirt a bit," says he.

"I can't; it won't come down. I got the Hennifer girl to give it a pull, and it nearly came off. I told her to stop. I thought *half* a skirt was better than no covering—don't you?"

"Don't ask *me*. There's so little of it, that I can't see it."

"What nonsense. Why, it's the very same frock I wore at the Derwents last year. Just after we were married, and you didn't say a *word* then!"

"You must have *grown*!" says he dismally. At which she roars with laughter, and he, after a struggle, joins her. They are always the best of friends *au fond*, and quite devoted lovers, these two queer people.

Nell, who has been claimed by a very resplendent Louis Quinze for the next dance, is passing by Sir Stephen, who, to say the least of it, is looking gloomy.

"Who do you want to murder now?" asks she gaily, turning her charming face up to his, and delaying a little, to the annoyance of her partner, who has been for one long hour waiting for this dance. "What ails your majesty? On what"—saucily—"is your highness brooding?"

Wortley looks down at her, at the little face, the brilliant smile.

"You!" returns he roughly, abominably, and turns away.

Miss Prendergast's face loses a little of its joy.

"I say, who's that?" asks her partner. "What a wet blanket sort of chap. Your"—he is a very experienced young man—"brother perhaps?"

"No. My guardian!"

"Ah! They're always brutes!" says her partner. "Don't give him an inch; fight him all you know. Guardians are the—well, they *are*! *He* looked"—gaily—"when you asked him that question about murder, as if he'd like to murder *you*!"

Meantime Wortley has turned back, and gone up the supper-room again, to find himself presently near to Mickey, who is being very closely questioned by Grant as to who is the gay spark from the barracks who has just led away the only girl in the world!

Mr. McNamara is making him as wretched as he possibly can. The man from the barracks, according to *him*, is a baronet, immensely rich, and undoubtedly head over ears in love with Nell.

"What do *you* think, Wortley?" asks McNamara. "You saw Woodleigh going by now with Miss Prendergast, didn't you? Grant won't believe he's in love with her! Very rude of Grant, *I* say. Why, anyone could *see* it. Did you catch the expression of his eye as he looked at her? And I'm sure it's no wonder."

"Nobody said it *was* a wonder," says Grant gruffly.

"You give in then?" says Mickey. "If you want to know my mind, I think she's the prettiest girl I know."

Grant smiles, and then, slowly, yet as if voluntarily, says:

"'There's nothing half so sweet in life!'"

He laughs as if a little ashamed of his enthusiasm, but a sigh follows the laugh.

Wortley gives him a keen glance, then walks away.

"Wortley, too, is awfully gone in that direction," says Mr. McNamara, who finds much enjoyment in piling up the agony, and who is nothing if not troublesome.

"He? Wortley? I don't believe she'd look at him," says Grant hastily.

"No? Sure?"

"What do you think yourself?" impatiently, as if the bare idea is maddening.

"Haven't had time to go into it," says McNamara.

"I give every moment I have to finding out if she is likely to look at me."

"Oh, you! Get out!" says Grant.

"Think she wouldn't? That's all *you* know about it," says Mickey. "She's looking at me now, anyway." And, indeed, Miss Prendergast through the open doorway that leads into the hall beyond is beckoning, almost affectionately, to him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I am now all bereft,
As when some tower doth fall
With battlements and wall,
And gates and bridge and all,
And nothing left."

A SECOND quadrille had been ordered by Cecilia to please Lord Frumley, who having grown old (and done it most gracefully too), still cannot bear to think himself altogether out of it, and likes now and then to stand up with the best of them." With him, Cecilia is "always the best of them." He admires her openly, chivalrously, and pays her the oldest, the most delightful compliments with all the charm that gave a lustre to compliments half a century ago.

Cecilia, who has laid her pail aside, is talking to him gaily, quite as if he were her equal in years, which perhaps is the charm she has for the old gentleman, but now it is her turn to go forward, and presently she finds herself making vague little steps before Captain Stairs, who happens to be her *vis-à-vis*.

"Our first dance to-night," says she mockingly. "Why have you not asked me?" There is something more than mockery in her eyes, however, as they meet his.

There is no time for a reply, but presently they meet again.

"After this?" says he quickly. He looks pale and worried. He plainly cannot bring himself to return the smile with which she accepts his proposal. To give him the next, she will have to throw over somebody, but it never for a moment occurs to her to hesitate about doing this.

Philip's avoidance of her throughout the evening, until now, when the dance is almost over—now when she has *compelled* him to ask her, has not only surprised her, but has raised within her an eager determination to learn from him the reason of his so treating her. Had he shown a marked desire to dance with anyone

else she could have understood it, but he had spent most of his evening lounging against the doorways; once or twice he had danced with Nell, once or twice with someone else, and that was all. And not to ask *her*.

The quadrille is hardly at an end before he comes to her.

"You will give me this?"

"Though you don't deserve it." She looks at him with as near an approach to a frown as her happy nature will allow. "But"—she looks fearfully round her—"if you really want to dance this with me, I expect we shall have to run for it." She looks round again. "Yes!" cries she excitedly. "Here he comes!" She steps quietly but rapidly behind a huge man on her left, and disappears through the window on to the balcony, and so, laughing delightedly, runs down into the garden below.

"Oh! what an escape!" says she, as Stairs joins her. "And *such* a man too. Waltzes like an elephant." She is laughing always. She has forgotten everything, as usual, except the actual moment.

They have reached now a little walk, hedged in by rhododendrons, and suddenly Cecilia stops. Her companion's silence has startled her. Hitherto she has been rushed along by her flight from the partner who is now hopelessly examining room after room in search of her, but all at once a sense of something wrong checks her.

"What is it?" says she breathlessly, a little frightened, a little unnerved by Stairs' queer silence. She waits for an answer, but only for a moment. She is not used to waiting. "*What* is it, Philip?" demands she again, almost imperiously. "Speak. *Tell* me."

He is still silent.

She lays her hand upon his arm. And *then* he wakes! He flings her hand from him, and turns upon her—fury blazing in his eyes.

"What devilish cruelty made you choose that dress?" says he.

It is the outbreak of a whole night's agony! In his passion he could almost have caught and slain her. All night—all night! Great God, what a time it has been! He has stood, and walked, and talked, and endured, with

actual murder in his soul; a very fire burning within his breast—the scorching fire of memory!

As she had looked on that last night—when he left her, believing in her, yet, with a sad sense of honour, refusing to bind her—so she stood in the early part of to-night—there in the hall—in the same gown, with the same eyes and lips, the same smile. She was not an hour older! She was the same beautiful child.

The illusion was complete, though it lasted only for a moment. Then the cursed memory came back. The girl over there was not a girl at all. She was married—she was a mother. She belonged to another man!

He had looked to the “other man”—to Gaveston, and once again hatred against fate shook him—Gaveston, in his fancy costume, looking older than his years. “Peter the Hermit” was a trying dress, and was sure to make a man of forty look considerably older. And she had sold herself to *him*—a man old enough to be her father. The great difference of age between Cecilia and Peter was, of course, accentuated by their different costumes.

He is brought back to the present by Cecilia—by Cecilia’s face. She has not spoken, but her face is terrible, and she has fallen back from him, and has clutched the arm of the garden chair near her, as though incapable of standing alone.

“Cecilia,” begins he passionately. He takes a step towards her, but she waves him back.

“Don’t go on!” says she—the pretty happy voice is low and hoarse. “*I know*. I didn’t know before. I”—wildly—“thought my thoughts were dreams—but now I know.” She turns to him, very slowly, and looks at him, her young, beautiful figure, in its quaint setting of motley wear, her still younger face, in its setting of deepest misery, making a picture he would be slow to forget. “*I know*,” says she again. And then faintly, “I would to God I didn’t!”

The dull, wild misery of her voice is terrible. Stairs, going to her, catches her hands.

“No!” says she, faintly, but she leaves her hands in his, and lets him presently press her gently down into the seat, on the arm of which she has been leaning.

“Why did you not answer my letters?” asks he, still holding her hands.

"Your letters?" She looks at him. "*What* letters?"
"Those I wrote from India."

She pauses, as if thinking—looking back—searching her memory, and then a most heart-broken look comes into her eyes.

"Think! *think!*" says he. His voice has lost its strength. He is gazing at her in a sort of wild despair.

"Think! There is nothing to think of," says she miserably. "Except"—she lifts most woe-begone eyes to his—eyes full of sad reproach—"except that you never wrote."

He lets her hands go.

"Do you know what you are saying?"

"Do *you?*" returns she. "Letters! You never wrote me one. I waited—I thought—I"—her voice drops—"hoped. But there were no letters. I never got one."

Stairs, turning away from her, begins to walk up and down the path in an agitated way.

"You tell me you never got a letter from me—from the day I left you—the night rather." Again that night comes back to him, with its memories, that first, *last* kiss laid upon her lips—and she—his beloved—dressed as she is now dressed. . . .

Why had he not spoken then——?

"Not one!"

He stops.

"Then who got them?"

"I don't know." She looks frightened—lost. Her large eyes have caught a startled look.

"I do," says Philip slowly. "It was your mother. She——" He hesitates. The woman is dead, and, perhaps, after all she had not done this base thing—there is no evidence to prove it, nothing but this sudden sharp suspicion—that is less a suspicion than a certainty—that has just come to him. And after all she was the girl's mother—and Cecilia may . . .

But Cecilia is past caring for her dead.

"It was!" cries she, springing to her feet. And then again, "*It was!* I know it—I feel it! She always hated you! She used to say things—and"—a little wildly—"I remember now how she used to taunt me with the fact of your *not* writing. Oh!" pressing her hand against her breast, "*the cruelty* of it." She turns

to Philip, as if demanding an answer. "Where are they? What did she do with them?"

"How can I say?" bitterly. "I know nothing! Burnt them, I daresay."

"Oh! *my letters!*" There is a touch of tragedy in her tone. "And never to read them! And I waited so! And to burn them——"

She stops, as if finding it impossible to go on, and then all at once her face changes. A fresh thought has come to her—her eyes once more grow brilliant, there is a strange triumph in them.

"You *did* write," cries she. "You did not forget. You loved me all the time! Oh, Phil!" She breaks into low, tremulous laughter, and catching his hand, presses it between both her own convulsively. "Oh! I am so happy!" A little colour swims into her cheeks, her lips have parted in the gladdest smile.

There is not a sound anywhere, save the slow swish of the waves against the rocks below. A faint sea-fragrance dwells upon the air, and overhead the stars begin to burn dimly. Already the "huge and thoughtful night" is drawing to its close, and beyond, behind the purple hills, faint streaks of light are growing.

Philip has clasped his other hand over hers; but speech is beyond him. What is there to say? What words can avail them now? What is there for them but the memories of a dead past, and the looking forward to a still more lifeless future? The silence round seems to him actually oppressive; so typical of the days before them, when there will be only separation, and misery, and silence—always silence.

"There is a stillness in the stars,
And a sleep upon the earth;
And the day with all its jars
Is a dead jest void of mirth.
And my heart is breaking, sweet,
With the memory of that hour,
When our happiness complete
Sprang and blossomed like a flower."

He is roused from his painful reverie by the soft pressure of her fingers.

"Why don't you speak?" whispers she. "Don't you want me to be glad?"

"*Glad, Cissy!*" The ineffable sorrow of his tone falls upon her late exaltation like a cruel blow. She draws her hands from his, and steps back. "How am I to be glad! How can *you* be glad?"

"I am, I am!" says she eagerly. "I don't care how it goes, you have been given back to me. No one can taunt me now about you, not even my own heart. You *did* love me all that time, and I am glad because I know it."

"And after that?"

To Cecilia, who never goes beyond the moment, this question is a trouble.

"Why think of that?" says she. "We are here now, and together, and you did write, and—we shall be friends always."

Stairs sighs impatiently. What a child she is still.

"Oh, I know what you are thinking," says Cecilia impatiently too; "you believe in that old silly idea that a man and a woman can't be merely friends. I tell you they can; *we* shall be friends, Philip—you and I."

He turns away.

"Oh, *we must!*" says she, and then suddenly, unexpectedly she covers her face with her hands and bursts into tears.

In a moment she is in his arms, crying her heart out against his.

"Oh, it was cruel, cruel!" she says, "they told me that men came and went like that . . . you meant nothing, they said . . . they hinted to me that you had been amusing yourself . . . And I—I did not know what I wanted you to mean. I did not know that you . . . you . . ."

"*Loved you!*" he puts in hoarsely. "Have you only found that out now—now when it is too late?"

"Too late!" She echoes the words miserably, lifting her head and looking at him. "Too late!" She trembles, and draws back from him, the significance of the words comes to her, and with it a great wave of anger. "She's dead," says she, in a low but violent tone and with such passion as startles him, coming from so slight, so delicate a thing. "But I shall never forgive her. *Never!* neither here nor in the world to come."

She sways a little as if shaken by this sudden emo-

tion—she to whom stirring emotions are unknown, who hitherto has gone through life carefully shielded from the slightest breeze; and Stairs catching her, makes her sit down upon the seat behind her.

“Don’t talk like that,” says he. “It is useless, and besides—she was your mother.”

“That is what makes it so cruel!” says Cecilia faintly. She has ceased crying now, but the late traces of her anguish still lie upon her cheeks. Stairs taking out his handkerchief wipes them away softly.

“Rest a little,” says he tenderly. He draws her to him, and with a sigh she leans her head against him. Her late sharp emotion has quite worn her out.

The moments fly and still they remain so, not moving, not speaking—scarcely thinking.

Presently Stairs stoops over her, the movement disturbs her and she looks up at him.

“Take off your glove,” entreats he softly. “I want to feel your hand in mine again.”

She makes him no answer, nor does she move. Her hand is still in his. Slowly and with trembling fingers he unbuttons the long glove, and slowly, very slowly draws it off. At last the pretty hand and arm are bare, and lying within his, with only him and the darkening heavens to see. She had said nothing all the time. She had not stirred. Stairs, with that soft rounded childish arm within his grasp, loses himself—he stoops and presses his lips to it with passionate fervour.

The sound of approaching footsteps had been unheard by him till now—now when it is a little late. Nell with Grant had come out through the window of the billiard room, and had sauntered back this way to the house again. Nell, even at a distance, her eyes accustomed to the darkness, had recognised Cecilia’s gown at once as she sat there upon the garden chair; she had also noticed Stairs. She had said no word to her companion, why she hardly knew, but afterwards she thanked Heaven for her silence, because afterwards—a moment afterwards—she had seen Stairs stoop and press that impassioned kiss upon her sister’s arm.

She remembered little more, beyond a frantic desire to take Grant away—away, anywhere, that he too might not see. She felt sick and cold, and faint, very faint.

She moved on in a sort of wild haste to the house, Grant following her. She only knew as she gained the conservatory door, that Grant had *not* seen—that so far Cecilia was safe. Oh! that she should have to think about Cecilia's safety!

* * * * *

Had Cecilia heard the sound of her soft footsteps? She has sprung to her feet, at all events, pushing back Stairs as he attempts to help her.

"Oh—no. Don't come near me. I had forgotten—forgotten——"

"You were only remembering," returns he sadly.

"It is *now* I am remembering," says Cecilia, in a frightened way. "I am remembering—*Peter!*"

"There is no need," bitterly, "to remember him. He is with you always!"

"Come back to the house," cries she nervously. "Come at once. I——"

"You will see me again?"

"Again? of course." She looks startled. "You are not going away?"

"No. But—to-morrow—to-morrow, I want to see you. There are so many things to clear up. I *must* know how it all was—how our lives were arranged for us. You *owe* me an explanation, Cissy. You will give me an hour—an hour only—on that little beach to the west of the 'Dead Man's Strand' between twelve and one."

He is holding her. His eyes are bent on hers.

"Yes—yes—only let us go in now."

"Still—you promise?"

"Yes." Her face is very pale.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Sunlight has shadow, cool for those that wander,
Moonlight has shadow, safe for those that woo;
Ah, on what vanities our life we squander!
Shadows we are, and shadows we pursue."

To-day has waked most fair and sweet. A little storm-shower had descended awhile ago—but it had been too short (in spite of its childish anger) to mar the glory of the day. Moist odours rising from the earth, and a rainbow over the hills beyond, stooping as if dipping one end into the sea, just reminds one of it, but no more.

Nell, standing outside the hall door, looks up to the glowing masses of white clouds, resting on their blue ground, and resplendent with the touches of gold the sun is giving them.

Breakfast is over. Indeed, most of the inmates, guests included—Cecilia had asked several young people to come to her dance, and stay until the following day—had taken that meal in their rooms.

Nell had not been one of them; she had risen at her usual hour, after a sweet, dead sleep of three hours, and having escaped from the few other early risers, has made up her mind to go for a long walk to shake off a sort of nervous fatigue, that threatens to give her one of the worst headaches she has ever known.

How lovely it is out here, how cool, after that late splendid shower. Up from the pastures below fresh perfumes from the washed grasses are coming to her. And here, as they blow from the garden, she can almost *feel* the sweet scents of the mignonette—and from the late roses comes a sigh or two.

It is delightful here in the porch, but out there the sun is shining hotly, and the heat seems beyond all control. But Nell, slender and pale, defies it; crowning her head with a huge hat that makes her look like a mushroom and, unfurling a big white umbrella, she sallies forth, and speeding quickly across the gravel, where

the sun shines hottest, gains the shade of the avenue almost immediately.

Her way to the wood leads her past the kitchen garden, and over the wall the warm perfume of the strawberries reaches her—delicate, enchanting.

Far over there the corn is ripening for the sickle, the grass for the scythe, and farther still lies the ocean, swaying, dreaming, glinting in the white light.

She is in the grateful shelter of the wood now, and taking off her hat, lets the light wind blow upon her forehead. Her thoughts, confused, uncertain, stray always to one point! To Cecilia.

If she could only believe that dreadful moment last night a mistake—an hallucination on her part; but unfortunately she is not made of those who easily deceive themselves. She had seen Cecilia's hand in Stairs', she had seen him stoop and kiss her sister's arm. At the remembrance of it, standing here alone amongst the tranquil trees, she flushes crimson, and involuntarily covers her eyes with her fingers. No, there was no doubt about it. She had made quite sure. Would she, indeed, ever forget that five minutes when, having gained the house, she had sent Grant away, and hiding herself from everyone's sight behind the folds of a curtain, had waited in a very agony of suspense for Cecilia's coming? It seemed horrible to her to leave her out there—with Philip—with perhaps everyone wondering where their hostess was. And then at last she came, to the girl's almost passionate relief, alone—but with one hand and arm bare!

Nell stands trembling now, as she thinks of it. And Peter—poor, darling Peter! The big, honest, trusting man has found a safe corner in Nell's heart. Did Cecilia think of *him*? She had told her she did not *love* him, but still—she belongs to him—he believes in her.

What a tangle it all seems. She sighs heavily, and goes on through the wood, and presently, being young and buoyant, and full of youth's certainty that nothing can go wrong for ever—that there *must* be a way out of everything—her spirits rise again, and it is with quite all her old pretty sprightliness, she comes face to face with Wortley as she turns a corner in the wood path.

She has not forgotten the rather cavalier manner in which he had answered her last night, and now she throws up her head a little, and when he mechanically holds out his hand to her in greeting, she puts her own behind her back.

"I hope you are in a better temper this morning," says she. The wind has been playing havoc with her hair, and across her forehead some riotous love-locks are flying. Her mirth suggests a good deal of temper, and her eyes are looking defiantly into his.

"I am glad to see *you* looking so well this morning!" returns he, calmly. "Evidently dancing agrees with you. As to my temper, it is as well as it usually is."

"Then I'm very sorry for the poor thing!" says Miss Prendergast promptly.

A pause.

"As far as I was able to understand you," says she presently, "you wanted to murder me last night!"

This awful accusation does not, as she expects, reduce him to powder; on the contrary, he bears the attack without flinching.

"Hardly that, I think!"

"Decidedly that. I said to you 'Who do you want to murder now?' and you said '*You!*' in a most awful tone."

"I'm afraid they didn't cultivate your memory at that French school you were at. What really occurred was: 'On whom is your majesty brooding?' and then I said '*You!*'"

"Why," says Nell, with a sort of audacious gaiety, "it was quite a compliment after all. I quite thought you were desirous of seizing and slaughtering me, and now it seems you were only giving me your *best* thoughts!"

She has both her hands behind her back now, and is leaning towards him, her face uplifted. There is malice and saucy defiance in her gaze.

"Why not?" acquiesces he, cheerfully.

Without changing her attitude she looks at him again, and then:

"Well, you *can* tell a lie!" says she.

The second bombardment is entirely satisfactory. He

goes down before it. His face darkens; if she had meant to provoke him to anger, she has undoubtedly won the day.

"If you insist on my speaking," says Wortley coldly, "I may as well say at once that I was a little surprised by certain things you said to me last night."

"They must have been surprising things, indeed, to drive you to a desire to murder me." She pauses, and then, lightly still, but with a touch of hauteur, "I should like to hear what the things were!"

"What is the good of going into it?" says he impatiently. "I asked you a question, and you answered me. The answer I felt sure was true. Of course you were quite at liberty to answer any way you liked—and quite as of course, I should never have asked the question. And besides——"

"Is the answer to be sent in now or next week?" interrupts Miss Prendergast, with exaggerated interest, who beneath a most benignant exterior is boiling with rage. "And where am I to get the coupon?"

Wortley passes over this frivolity as beneath him, which enrages her the more.

"As you don't seem to understand," says he, "let me explain the riddle. I asked you if you were engaged to Grant——"

"You didn't, indeed!" quickly.

"At all events, I asked you if there was anything between him and you, and you told me that he was as little to you as you were to him!"

"Well?" says Nell.

In all honesty she had meant what she said last night, but now it is quite impossible to her not to lead him astray, to mystify him. To bring her to book like this! What nonsense! What can he mean? Really, guardians are going to the bad nowadays, in the way of—— There will be thumbscrews and the rack presently, if they are encouraged.

"Well?" repeats Wortley, vainly striving to subdue his own anger.

"You tell me that I said he was as little to me as I was to him. Well?"—she says this most aggravating word again, nodding her head at him slowly.

"I understood you to mean—No doubt I am very

stupid," says Wortley, "but I certainly did understand that you and Grant were friends and friends only——"

"So we are—friends and friends only. I like him very much, and he likes me."

"And beyond that?"

Nell, in spite of her determination to carry on the conversation in the most dignified way, here bursts out laughing.

"What is beyond that?" asks she.

"There is this," says Wortley, "that I am in a measure responsible for you. That Grant has nothing beyond his pay, and that *you* have three hundred a year. If you loved him——" he waits, paling during the waiting, but she says nothing. "No one should say a word, but by your own showing"——he waits again here, but again she says nothing. "Of course I know you look upon me with distrust, but I have promised to look after you, to see that you do not throw yourself away. To——"

"You have promised a great deal, it seems to me," says Nell. "Do you think it likely you can perform it all?"

"I certainly shall, even if——"

"Oh, don't begin another speech!" interrupts she with a shrug, "one is enough for a lifetime; you ought to have gone into the Salvation Army. If you had given its supporters a speech like that, they'd have made you a General on the spot!"

"Let us keep to the question," says Wortley, coldly. He is now extremely angry, and in spite of her assumption of indifference, it is quite plain that she too has lost her temper. There is, indeed, a good deal of electricity in the air. "You persist still in saying that Grant is nothing more than a mere acquaintance, yet you allow him to call you by your name?"

Here Miss Prendergast colours a little. How had he known—heard? Being full of resources, however, she recovers herself almost immediately.

"How *should* a mere acquaintance call me then? How do you call me?" She lays a little stress on the question. "'Miss Prendergast'—isn't that the right way to call me?"

"For a mere acquaintance—for *me*, for example! And I was alluding to Christian names. To allow Grant to call you 'Pen' just makes the difference!"

"Between?"

"Acquaintanceship, and——"

"Friendship. I think I told you that he and I were very good friends?"

"Such good friends, that he may call you by—a pet name? A name that even your sister does not call you!"

He has gone a little too far. The girl turns upon him passionately. Her tone is low, almost gentle, but her eyes are flashing.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Sweet Maisie is in the wood,
Walking so early,
Sweet Robin sits on the bush,
Singing so rarely."

"You make a mistake, Sir Stephen," says she, her pretty head decidedly raised, and her voice vibrating with anger, "you take too much upon you. I refuse to see your right to interfere with me so far. If I choose to allow Captain Grant to call me by my Christian name, or any other name, what is that to you? You may be the guardian of my *money*, but," resting her eyes firmly on his, "you are not the guardian of *me*!"

There is suppressed defiance in her whole air. Wortley looks back at her.

"No. *Thank Heaven*!" says he devoutly.

She laughs, a short and most unmirthful laugh.

"You are very frank."

"What is the use of being anything else? You know what this unlucky position I am in is to you, and you must see what it is to me. To have control even of your money is bad enough. If I could get out of this arrangement which, for my sins, I have got into, believe me, for both our sakes, I would do it at once."

She gives him a swift glance, and colours scarlet. At this moment she could almost have killed him.

"Why don't you then?" says she icily.

"How can I? Is my oath to a dying woman to count for nothing? I honestly confess I regret that oath now, seeing how distasteful it is to you; but I shall keep it, even at the risk of your increasing displeasure."

"Oh, don't consider *me*," says she sarcastically; she had been toying with her white umbrella, digging it into the ground, and tracing patterns in the soft mould with it, and now it slips from her grasp, and falls. Wortley picks it up, and holds it half-unconsciously.

"I *have* to consider you, of course, that is part of it. I have to see that you do not wilfully throw away——"

"I *won't* be considered," cries Nell, suddenly abandoning all her hardly-got-together reserve. "I won't let you see about me in any way. I think it very rude and impertinent and *horrid* of you to say that it was a queer thing of me to let Captain Grant call me Pen."

Here evidently lies the gist of the whole matter.

"I don't think I mentioned the word 'queer!'"

"Yes, you did. And if you didn't it was just the same thing! And besides——"

"If you will let me explain——"

"No, I won't! Because I know—and I hate arguments."

"But——"

"I won't hear another word."

"That is so like a woman!" says he wrathfully.

"Well, well, *well!*" She taps her foot upon the ground, and frowns at him in a little frenzy, "what do you want me to be like? *A man?*"

It occurs to him all at once, that he never wants her to be like anything but *herself*. That would be all-sufficient for him. He is still holding the umbrella, and as this stupendous thought for the first time dawns upon him, he strikes the point of it into the ground with considerable force, and unfortunately against a hidden stone. It instantly, as if to add to his discomfiture, breaks off at the handle in a most low and iniquitous fashion.

He is now left standing with a broken handle in his hand, and the corpse of the white umbrella glaring up at him from its half-opened grave.

"I'm so sorry," begins he with the orthodox speech we all know.

"So you ought to be," says Miss Prendergast, who

doesn't care a fig about the umbrella, but who cares a great deal about his late interference. She is thinking so little about the umbrella, indeed, that she fails to understand the actual meaning of his speech. "You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself in my opinion."

"The mischief can be remedied," says he hastily, glancing at the umbrella. Miss Prendergast, however, is glancing at her other wrongs.

"No; never," says she with emphasis.

"You will surely let me restore——"

"Restore! *How* could you restore?"

Restore the vague friendship between them that has hitherto existed! Not likely!

"But a new one."

"A *new* one. The old one has been so bad that I could not bear even an attempt at a new one," says she.

"It doesn't seem so bad to me."

He has picked up the upper part of the umbrella from the earth in which it is sticking, and is now regarding it carefully.

"I don't know what you call bad; to me it seems completely broken."

"Oh, not so bad as that!"

"It isn't worth talking about, anyway," says she, with a touch of hauteur.

"It is bad enough, certainly," says he. He is looking at the white top of the umbrella in one of his hands and at the handle of it in the other.

"Yes—too bad."

"You must let me give you another."

"Another——?" "friendship" is all *but* on her lips.

"Umbrella," says he.

This makes an end of all things.

He—he—this detestable guardian, had been talking of that wretched umbrella all the time, whilst *she* had been talking of—what had she been talking of? A wave of hatred towards him sweeps over her. And as she stands, not knowing how to answer, there is a rustle in the bushes near her, and Philip Stairs steps into view.

"You, Nell!" says he pleasantly. There is a sort of hurry in his air, however. He stops to speak to Wort-

ley and Wortley nods to him with all the calm in the world.

"Where are you going?" asks Nell, turning to Stairs with a rather too open expression of relief.

"To Deadman's Beach." He makes a little movement of his head to her and Wortley, and takes a step forward. As if by intuition Nell knows why he is going to the Beach. Her heart sinks within her. By a gesture she stops him. She holds out her hand, but for a second speech fails her. She has forgotten all about her own injuries—how small they seem, how puerile with this fresh, fearful doubt of Cecilia crushing her.

"I'll go with you," says she steadily. It is horrible to her to have to do this thing—to thrust herself upon him, as it were; but her strongest consciousness is that it *has* to be done. She risks Wortley's opinion—and Stairs' too—but she knows she would risk far more than this to save Cecilia; to hide this folly from the world. Folly she feels certain is the only name for it—but people can build big houses of many stories out of "folly," and if Peter ever knew, or suspected, how would it be then?

"It won't be too long a walk?" suggests Stairs smiling, and making his suggestion with plainly nothing but the tenderest solicitude for her comfort. But the girl with her eyes on his face, sees how it changes, darkens, falls, and once again her soul dies within her.

"I like walking," says she bravely. There is a great deal said about courage, but the courage that makes a sensitive girl, because of a sense of duty, deliberately insist on going where she knows her company is not desired, is of a very high order too. Nell Prendergast could have cried through sheer misery, as she thus, with the lightest air in the world, persists in accompanying Stairs.

"Come then," says he, assuming an air of delight. And very well he does it too. So well that Wortley, watching them walk away, tells himself that Stairs is overborne with pride at Nell's desire to go for this walk with him. Wortley, who has seen nothing, strides onward towards his home. He turns now and sees the other two going over the hill and down to the beach

below. He tells himself as he goes that he always *knew*. The girl is evidently a born coquette. Grant is not sufficient for her, it seems—what an ass he had been to insist so on her conduct towards Grant. He will probably, as time goes on, have to protest a good deal about her conduct towards a dozen other suitors. What abominable nonsense they had talked about Stairs' infatuation for Mrs. Gaveston. "Foul-mouthed Thersites," all. Any one running can read that he is in love with Mrs. Gaveston's sister; it seems impossible now to call her Nell, even in his thoughts.

He had noticed how Stairs had danced with no one at last night's ball save with—Nell. Stairs' one disastrous dance with his hostess had gone unnoticed by him, and very reasonably too, as the dance, or rather the time for it, had been spent in the garden, where no man could see. To Wortley therefore it now seems that Nell had been flirting outrageously with Stairs. *Poor Nell!* who had sacrificed a considerable part of her night's enjoyment to keeping her sister free from the damaging gossip that always goes on in a small neighbourhood. *Poor Nell,* who had thrown herself into the breach, who had danced a great deal with Stairs towards the close of the evening, sorely against her will, who had decided on saving Cecilia at all costs, and who had actually courted the talk of the people round her, in the hope that they would say he is flirting with me, not with *her*?

To Wortley all this is unknown. Her meaning is hidden from him, and to him she appears only as a foolish, heartless coquette, driven here and there by an unquenchable desire to subdue all men to her will.

All men! He checks himself at this point. Grant—Stairs—she may—she *has* tried her power upon—but on him, Wortley? She had certainly not sought to subdue him. So much is sure.

Pshaw! Why waste time over her? It comes to him suddenly that he has wasted a good deal of time over her lately, and the knowledge fills him with a sense of fine self-contempt. To give even a thought to a girl like that—a mere paltry—words fail him, and with a little flick of his cane, he determines to dismiss her altogether from his mind.

But the end of half-an-hour's brisk walking convinces him that this is a feat not so very easy of accomplishment. Her face is as fresh before him then as when thirty minutes ago he had decided on putting it finally behind him. Love, like the dandelion root, strikes deep into the ground; and like that stubborn weed is hard to eradicate. Much digging and many strokes it takes to kill it. If, however, at this moment you had told Wortley he was in love with his wilful ward, he would have laughed you to scorn.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Wide tho' the world that holds them far apart,
Soul beckons soul, and heart goes forth to heart."

NELL has gone over the fields, across the cliffs, with Stairs—fear and distress within her. The morning is glorious, but all its glories are thrown away upon her. The splendid amber clouds above her head, the wheeling gulls, shining like silver as they flash to and fro from their nests within the rocks, the radiant beauty of the great sea itself—all are as ashes in her mouth.

Now and again Stairs talks to her, a dragging converse, with a Yes or a No from her thrown in, until now, when they have come to the descent to the beach. She turns mechanically to go down, her heart beating with fear, and yet with a little hope springing up too. Perhaps—perhaps after all she has wronged Cecilia—perhaps there will be no one down below.

This little, trifling hope gives her courage enough to look round, and all at once the beauty of the scene catches her, and holds her enchained. From right to left her eyes glance, bewitched, enchanted.

Now, from this spot on which she stands, which is almost the topmost point of the cliff, one can see not only into the beach on her right, but into Dead Man's Beach, where she is going, upon her left. Twin beaches that are separated only by the rock that juts out from the tiny promontory on which Nell is standing, hesitating, admiring.

All at once something white on the beach on her right hand catches her attention. What is it? A parasol. She grows very pale.

He had lied to her. He had said he was going to Dead Man's Beach—and there, down there. . . . A feeling of suffocation for a moment overcomes her, then she recovers herself, waiting a little while to make sure of her voice.

"Is that Cecilia down there?" asks she quietly at last. "I think I recognize her parasol. If you don't mind, Philip, I think I should like to go to her."

She looks him fairly in the face. And Stairs looks back at her. His eyes are triumphant. That she understands is quite clear to him.

"As you will," answers he immovably, turning with her, and going in the direction of the little beach—the tiniest and least frequented of the many that decorate the coast—where he knows for a *certainly* that Cecilia is awaiting his coming. Since the moment that he left her, he had had but one thought—would she keep her tryst? He had not dreamt of sleeping—a swift plunge into the sea, in the cold, sweet dawning of the morning, when his host and the rest of the household were sleeping the sleep of the just, had given him all the rest, all the strength he needed.

To see her again—and alone. To feel her hand in his! He knew it was all madness—a building of memories that will only leave him more desolate in the future than he is in the present. But he is content to risk that—and more—for the mere empty joy of seeing her now.

Nell's coming had been a death-blow to him. He had lied to her deliberately, had managed excellently well to keep her in casual conversation, even whilst rage burned within him—but he had not been able to conceal the quick flash of unspeakable happiness that sprang into his eyes, when he had seen that Cecilia was waiting on the tiny beach below them—waiting for *him*!

His heart leaped up within him then, and now is still beating madly as Nell, with an inward groan, and with feet that falter, leads him—Heaven alone knows with what anxious thoughts—to her sister.

As their footsteps reach her ears, Cecilia, with a little start, turns. Her face is radiant, expectant. Seeing Nell with Stairs, her eyes for a moment dilate, and a cruel crimson dyes her cheeks. Then it fades, and she comes forward with an air perfectly natural, entirely unembarrassed.

"Is that you, Philip?" says she, with the prettiest air of surprise imaginable. "I thought you quite too lazy a person to be out so early after a dance."

Her low, *trainante* voice is very quiet, her manner quite as usual. It would be impossible to guess at the frantic struggle she is making to conceal the truth from Nell—from Nell, with her clear eyes—those eyes that are now turned from her, as if in scorn perhaps—or pity—or contempt.

Stairs is saying something, as idle, as useless as her own speech, but she does not hear him. A wild desire to cry is frightening her. Even as she answers Philip and laughs, the terrible tears are in her eyes and throat. A hunted feeling is unnerving her—a swift and crushing knowledge that here—on this spot—is the beginning of some horrible end. Before she had been afraid of Peter—always a little afraid, in spite of the idolatrous affection he has lavished upon her—and now there is Nell to be afraid of too—and—the child.

Oh! no—no! *He* could not guess—he could never know. And there is nothing—really *nothing*! A revulsion of feeling drives back the tears into her heart. What! may she not even *speak* to the man she—she has known for so many years, without all the world being there to hear—without all the world being ready to condemn?

Her manner has grown a little feverish now, and a hot, brilliant spot is forming on her cheeks.

"It is growing late, Cissy," says Nell, very gently. "You know you have some people coming to luncheon, and there are others coming in the afternoon to tea—and scandal!" She smiles faintly at Philip. "I think we ought to be going home."

"Yes—yes, of course," agrees Cecilia eagerly. "I am so stupid, I always forget things. I hope"—hurriedly, and without looking at him, however—"you will come to luncheon, Philip."

"I am afraid not. The McGregors are having some people also. Perhaps later on I may look in."

"Yes—do," says Cecilia.

"We must not steal him altogether from the McGregors, Cissy," says Nell, as lightly as she can manage.

No one makes any reply to this poor little hint, but Cecilia presently holds out her hand to bid Stairs "Good-bye."

Nell, full of the knowledge that it is her duty to see the farewell said for all that, turns abruptly away. A great disgust of her own position is humiliating her to the ground. What miserable fate has thrust her into it? To feel that they wish her out of the way, that they believe she is acting the spy with regard to them, drives her half mad. And yet—

She has no more time for further fears. Cecilia has slipped her arm into hers. There had been a moment, when Nell had so impatiently moved on, in which Stairs' and her hands had met, when they had looked into each other's eyes, and now Cecilia, because of that quick glance and pressure, is happy once again, forgetful of her terrors of a moment since, and ready to believe them vain. After all, of course, Nellie does not suspect that she still has a little (only a very *little*) love for poor, poor Phil! If she had, she would not have gone away, leaving them to bid each other good-bye. No, Nell thinks of nothing but that Philip is an old friend. And, indeed, what else is there to think of? And once she, Cecilia, has had an opportunity of fully explaining to him, that nothing in their past was caused by *her* fault—he must go away.

She has arranged it all delightfully, and very indefinitely. He must go certainly—not now—not soon—not until he has paid his promised visit to them—but go, of course, he will.

What a glorious day—what a heavenly sky! She chatters gaily to Nell all the way home, passing from topic to topic—from the merriest laughter over Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's costume of last night to one of Mickey's latest sayings—and all in the lightest vein. Talking a little fast, a little too persistently, perhaps, and always oblivious of the girl's few answers, and fewer smiles.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"On folly's lips eternal talkings dwell,
Wisdom speaks little, but that little well.
So lengthening shades the sun's decline betray,
But shorter shadows mark meridian day."

LUNCHEON has been quite a success. Never had Cecilia been so brilliant, so enchanting. Nell glancing at her now and then wonders whether after all she had not been mistaken—whether the fact of Cecilia and Philip having been both down at the sea this morning, was anything but a bare coincidence. Had she even been mistaken about last night? However it is, she feels a little comforted; had Cecilia anything *very* unhappy in her mind she could not possibly laugh and talk like that.

She is glad when they all rise from the table, and saunter idly towards the drawing-room, and the verandah beyond. As she, a little separated from the others, is crossing the hall, one of the servants gives her a long, slim, carefully tied-up parcel.

"Looks like a golf stick," thinks she, puzzled, and then:

"Who is it from, James?"

"Sir Stephen Wortley, ma'am."

"Oh," says Nell carelessly, and straightway turns and goes to her room. To snip the string that binds this mysterious parcel takes but a minute, and now before her is one of the loveliest parasols she has ever seen. All white silk and white lace, and little flounces She flings it from her on to the lounge that stands by the side of the fireplace in winter, but is now pushed sideways against the wall. An angry frown is puckering her brows.

"How hateful of him! How impertinent—as if she would accept anything from him, even though he *had* broken that other! And where did he get it? Not in Bigley-on-Sea certainly. Oh!" she almost stamps her foot. "Why, he must have driven post-haste into Whar-

ton, eight miles away, to get it for her! Now what *venom* that showed! Nothing but venom—nothing at all! He was determined to show her, that he would not be for one second in fault where she was concerned! Well—*she* can show him too!"

She picks up the poor innocent parasol again with the tips of her fingers as if loathing it, but once in her fingers, it seems impossible not to see how it looks when open. Her right hand slips half unconsciously up the beautiful ivory handle, and in another second she is standing before a long mirror, with the dainty white silk treasure held over her head. It suits her so admirably, she looks so entirely charming beneath it, that in spite of her anger she laughs at her own reflection in the glass.

Then she sighs.

"Vanity! Thy name is Woman!" says she scornfully. She closes the parasol slowly, reluctantly, and reties it in its packings. Then she sighs again, and this time more profoundly. She looks singularly like Cecilia at this moment.

Half an hour later Sir Stephen receives the parasol back again, from the hands of a mounted groom from Gaveston Park.

* * * * *

It is now just four o'clock, and many friends and acquaintances have come to talk over last night's triumphs. Everyone has been feeling a little flat, and the general invitation that Cecilia had given to everybody, as they left in the small hours of the morning—to come again to tea in the afternoon and discuss the affair—though received with doubt when given—had been hailed with rapture later on.

Amongst others Gaveston had put up Trent and Manners for the dance, and now the former, looking even a little more in want of chin than usual, is holding forth to Nell upon the terrace, where an extra tea-table has been arranged, round which—or near it—Grant and his sister, with some others, are sitting.

Trent is maundering on; Nell, whose mind is preoccupied, is apparently lost in admiration of his theories. He has now come to the conclusion that she is *the* cleverest girl he has ever met. The fact of her listening to

him, has secured her this tribute. The real fact, however, is that she has almost forgotten his existence, and is listening all over again to certain angry words said some hours ago, and grinding her little teeth over them too!

"In my opinion," Trent is saying, in his high squeaky voice, "Society is going to the bad." He manages to say this as though he has not heard it before. Perhaps he hadn't.

"A poor compliment to the little fraction of it you see here," says Nell, rousing partly from her dreams, and smiling.

"Society, in my opinion, is just as good and just as bad as it has been since the beginning of the world," says Mrs. Wilding with a hitch of her lean shoulders. "There are always half this way, and half that! Ten foolish virgins, you know, but ten wise also! And as it appears, it seems safer to back the ten wise."

"To which do you belong?" asks Mrs. Chance, with her friendliest smile, and quite a little touch of humour meant to carry off the sting of her remark.

Mrs. Wilding sticks her glass in her eye.

"Hard to say," says she, "but I'd back myself against you, anyway."

This interlude has happily passed unheard. Bella retires smiling, Mrs. Wilding drops her glass, and all is smooth once more.

Mr. McNamara having successfully tucked away all the maccaroons, to which form of confection he is specially addicted, is now giving his attention to the seed cake.

"What do you think about the decadence of Society, Mickey?" asks Nell, giving him a little unseen pinch. Everything is getting a little slow some way, and Mickey, if dragged into it, might make a diversion.

"What's the good of thinking about it?" says McNamara, leaning back luxuriously in his chair with the last bit of cake between his fingers. "I've thought until I'm nearly blind—" He glances pathetically at Nell. "Did you know I was going blind? Seen my new glasses?"

"No!" with concern, "Oh! Mickey, I am sorry!"

"You needn't be! I haven't seen 'em either," says

Mr. McNamara. "They're coming—in the sweet bime-bye! We must be on the look-out for them. As for Society, we all know what's the matter with *that*."

"No, we don't," say Mrs. Chance and Mrs. Wilding in a breath. "And," continues Mrs. Wilding, "I don't believe you know either."

"You wish me to speak?" Mr. McNamara looks round with a deprecating smile. He draws himself up in a dignified fashion, and half puts away from him the bit of cake he is holding, then, thinking better of it, finishes it. After this he leans forward, very much forward, coughs consumptively, interlaces his fingers, and begins. . . .

"But for *women*, there would be no society at all! This, my friends, I think you will all allow! But the struggle by women of the present day to equal or excel men in their own departments, especially those of physical prowess, though merely a revolt against the over-civilization of the nineteenth century, is a step on the backward road to that state of savagedom in which women performed all the manual labour, and men spent their lives in various congenial forms of amusement. Glass of water, please!"

"Not *one*, if you were to *die* for it," says Nell indignantly.

"More cake then?" sadly.

"You've eaten it all!"

"It's a poor world!" says Mr. McNamara.

"Well, but you know really it's getting to be such an awful shoddy thing," says Trent, who ought to have known better, as he is really very decently connected. But no doubt the chin has deteriorated him.

He is alluding still to Society.

"There's people called Buggins out in our town; they give dances, and are for ever asking us fellows to go there, and really they run the whole show so wonderfully well, that it makes you feel sort of mad. They haven't got an 'H' to their names, and they think they're talking English when they say, 'Thompson is a real good fellow, is Thompson!' Yet their entertainments are beyond reproach."

"'Tis their servants pull 'em through," says McNamara.

"Hah! now; I never thought of that before," says Trent, as though few thoughts have passed him by. "By Jove! what an idea! Very good, very good indeed! Capital thing! Tell it to the fellows when I get back."

"Off his head altogether now, poor chap!" says Mickey in an aside to Nell. "Very sad, don't you think? Feel remorse?"

"But why know such people," says Nell to Trent, ignoring Mickey and his remarks *in toto*, "if you don't like them?"

"That's just it, you see. Bound to know them in a way. They spread themselves, you know; they've money and they *grow*. It's detestable! Why, they spend their whole time trying to ape the manners of their betters."

"There has been a great deal of abuse levelled at *that* proceeding," says Gaveston, who has just come up. "But after all, is there nothing to be said *for it*? Surely it is better to ape the manners of those above, rather than the manners of those below us. For my part, I think there is a sort of healthiness in the desire to improve oneself."

"Of course, if it were for the sake of improvement——"

"Whatever it is for, it *must* tend to improve," says Gaveston, in his slow, gentle, beautiful voice, "and should therefore be encouraged. To study—to ape as you call it—those superior to them, is to show a longing for the better things of life. It must commend itself to everybody as a wise thing to learn, to say 'paper' rather than 'piper,' and to commit to memory the troublesome fact that there is an 'H' in 'Arry.'"

"You can defend 'em if you like," says Trent huffily. "But I assure you the Buggins are *very* dreadful."

"I don't believe Mrs. Buggins could be a bit worse than that awful Mrs. Parsons last night," says Mrs. Wilding. "Did any of you notice her? And she's *quite* good family!"

"How was she dressed?" asks Mrs. Chance.

Nell has moved a little away to see about some fresh arrival, and the land is clear.

"In a black dress, and a smile that reached from ear to ear."

"Oh! of *course* I remember her now. She was Night, or something ridiculous like that."

"Exactly. I saw her too," says Grant. "A big sort of woman with a loose robe."

"Just so," says Mickey. "Most terrifying robe. Take a pin out, ye know, and where would she be?"

This astounding conundrum leaves them all silent.

Mrs. Wilding has faded behind her fan, and Mrs. Chance has put on her most innocent smile.

"Ask us another?" says Grant faintly.

"Not a bit of it. I stick to my question. Where *would* she be?"

"Nowhere," suggests Grant.

"Wrong! What do you say, Manners?"

"All there," says that good-looking youth bravely.

"Got it," says Mickey admiringly. "Go up one."

Here Cecilia, stepping out of the drawing-room window, goes quickly towards someone who is coming across the lawn, behind the group at the tea-table.

"Oh, Sir Stephen," cries Cecilia, holding out to him both her hands in her pretty, gracious way, "so glad you have come."

Nell's eyes seek her cup, whilst she wildly breathes a prayer that her colour may not rise. He must have received the rejected parasol before he came.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"How is it under our control,
To love, or not to love?"

SIR STEPHEN seems in excellent spirits! All the way over he had been asking himself, why he was coming. But now that he is here, he knows. Nell is here!

During his drive to Wharton to buy the despised parasol, he had let his thoughts run riot with regard to her, and had at last come to the conclusion that though she was the last girl in the world with whom he could fall in love (he still kept up this farce with himself), she could hardly be the monster of treachery he had

imagined. One hates to think bad things of one's neighbours, and now a glance at her has convinced him doubly, that he had gone too far in his inward censuring of her.

She was not that sort of girl at all. She was young, light-hearted, a little frivolous, of course, but not so wilful a coquette as he had for a moment thought.

Perhaps the fact that he has found her with Trent beside her, and *not* Grant or Stairs, has given an impetus to the reversal of his judgment.

He doesn't feel in the least annoyed with her about the returning of the parasol. He had known quite well how she would behave about that. He had bought the costly trifle indeed, half with a view to paying his debt to her, and half with an amused knowledge of what a joy it would be to her to send it back to him. It seemed a pity to deny her such an intense gratification.

"I have had such a delightful walk over here," he is saying to Cecilia, whom he likes excessively, and who likes him. His clear voice sounds even clearer than usual on the soft, silent air. "I hardly know when I enjoyed a walk so much."

"Thank you, I accept it," says Cecilia, with a little coquettish smile. "And I quite understand. *I was to be found at the end of it.*"

"I knew you would take me," says Wortley, laughing too. "Do you know, by the bye, that you have some new-mown hay down there?" pointing to a meadow below them. "The scent of it is delicious!"

"Hay? Is there any hay left now?" asks Mrs. Wilding. "Where is it?" She looks carefully round her.

"In the meadow on your left," says Mickey. "It is lying on the ground, so you can hardly see it. Let's go down and make it into cocks."

"Oh, yes, *let us!*" cries Mrs. Wilding, who is one of those people who can't sit still, who always want to be *doing* something. "Mrs. Gaveston, can't we?"

It seems almost comic to hear anyone ask Cecilia's permission for anything. Cecilia, who can never say "No," and whose one belief is that everyone ought to be able to do just as they like in this world.

"Why not?" says she. She has but one feeling about it indeed, and that is that she cannot go too. Those

hateful old tabbies in the drawing-room—she will have to go and tell pretty lies to them whilst the others——
“But it is a long way round, I warn you. The gate into it is quite a quarter of a mile from this.”

“Oh! what a pity!”

Mrs. Wilding is beginning to look quite downcast, when Mr. McNamara, who is always full of resource, looking down towards the hedge that separates the coveted field from them, sees a hole in it.

“We can get through there,” says he. “There’s a ha-ha at the other side, but that needn’t count. I’ll pull you through like”—lowering his voice for Mrs. Wilding’s benefit—“Mrs. Buggins’s servants.”

No sooner said than done. They all rise from their seats. Besides Nell and the others, there are two very pretty sisters called Markham, who seem to think the hay-cock making quite a brilliant suggestion. Even Mrs. Chance looks delighted, and Sir Stephen goes boldly up to Nell.

“Are you coming?” asks he.

“Yes. But not for a moment or two,” coldly. “I shall follow presently. No one must wait for me, however.” She smiles her commands at Grant, to whom they are always sacred. She turns into the dining-room as she speaks, and the rest run down the sloping lawn to that break in the hedge indicated by Mickey the Pioneer! Nell, having watched them through it, and convinced herself that both Grant and Wortley have disappeared with the others, walks lightly across the grass and up to the opening in the hedge. It is an old friend of hers, through which she has slipped many and many a time with Geoffrey, and swung herself cleverly on to the grass below. She has now all but reached it, when Sir Stephen’s head appears in the opening, as he is clambering up the wall beneath it.

“I came back to help you down,” says he, with the most unconcerned air in the world.

“It was too good of you,” says Nell, drawing back.
“And also very useless. I get in and out of this place half-a-dozen times every week, without wanting anyone to help me.”

“I should think then it would be a variety to you to get some one *once* a week to help you,” says he unmoved.

Nell hesitates. For one thing, it is impossible to get through as long as he is blocking up the hedge. For another, even if he was not blocking it, it would be equally impossible to get down whilst he was looking on, her usual mode of procedure being distinctly more active than elegant. And then again—about that parasol. Of course he is one of the rudest people on record, and in every way detestable, but the one use of detestable people is to make studies of them, so as to avoid their little ways.

And perhaps she *had* been in fault about that parasol, but of course he should never have sent it. Certainly it showed signs of grace his having driven all the way to Wharton to get it for her. . . . And her rejection of it had been a little brusque. . . . And the note that had accompanied its return had certainly left something to be desired in the way of graciousness. . . .

On the whole perhaps——

“Well, if you will help me,” says she.

He springs back easily to the ground behind, and planting one foot upon the wall, holds out his arms to her. She leans forward, her hands upon his shoulders. His arms tighten round her, and in another moment she stands beside him. Their eyes meet, a glance passes between them. A distinctly hostile one on her part. He loosens his hold of her, and they follow the others who have now reached the end of the big meadow where the fallen grass lies heaviest.

The shortest way to this part leads past a corner, where the river runs merrily on its way to the sea below. The rains of the early morning have swollen it, and now it is rushing with mad haste over stones and through weeds and cresses—rushing

“In little sharps and trebles,”

to its vast home.

A giant clump of fir trees, bordered by alders, hides one corner of this surging river from the impromptu haymakers, and here Wortley stops.

“So you wouldn’t have that parasol?” says he—there is a touch of amusement in his tone.

“Oh, no! How *could* I take it? An accident is an accident. Of course you could not help breaking mine,

and there was no reason at all why you should have sent me another. And, at all events," raising her eyes gravely to his, "I should not accept anything from you."

"Not even though it helped to the easing of my conscience?"—his tone is quizzical.

"Not even then. Supposing always," with an irrepressible glance at him, "that you have one!"

"That sounds as though you considered me in disgrace," says Wortley.

"I am not considering you at all," says Miss Prendergast. "I think it very rude to consider people. It looks like prying into their conduct. You were considering me this morning, and if you remember, I didn't like it."

"Ah! but *your* conduct!" says he.

"Well, what of it?" a little warmly. She has been throwing leaves into the river and watching them whirling giddily away upon its bosom, but now she turns her attention to Wortley. There is fresh challenge in her glance. The fact that Wortley is smiling incenses her still more.

"It is perfect, of course." To her his tone seems mocking.

"You accused *me* of deceit this morning," says she resentfully. "Is there nothing untruthful in *that* answer?"

"Ah! I can see I am in disgrace," says he; his tone is still light, but he is a little piqued by her persistent determination to keep him at arm's length.

"Oh, no!" bitterly. "It is I who am in that unenviable position. Do you think," flinging her last handful of leaves into the grasping river, with a verve that betrays her frame of mind, "*I* have forgotten, because you choose to do so? Do you think that all the insults you showered on me this morning are to be wiped out so easily? Why," with a flash from her beautiful eyes, "you told me that *I lied*."

"I beg your pardon! That is impossible," says Wortley stiffly. "You are making some strange mistake."

His manner is now once again cold and forbidding. He had meant to be kind, considerate, he called it "considerate," but in reality the word was apologetic, but

she had thwarted his good intentions, and killed his mood.

"You were afraid to say it right out," says Nell scornfully, "but you meant it. I could see it in your eyes. They were," with a glad maliciousness, "*glaring* at me! You gave me to understand you didn't believe one word I said. You doubted me"

"Had I no cause to doubt?"

"None—none!"

"But——"

"I will not listen to your 'buts, I want no explanations. Explanations always come too late! You said I was wilfully deceiving you! And you said it was 'for your sins' you had been appointed my guardian, and you 'thanked Heaven' it was my money, not *me*, you were guarding, and," here she faces him suddenly with her hands clenched, but her eyes full of tears, "*how dare* you say all those horrid things to me—*how dare* you accuse me of falsehood!"

She has moved a little nearer to the brink of the river, and is now indeed looking angrily at Wortley from the outmost edge of its bank.

"Don't stand there!" says he quickly. "That bank is very uncertain."

"Not a bit more uncertain than a great many other things—than *you*, for example!" She makes a little tempestuous movement with her foot upon the crumbling bank, that in another woman he would have called a stamp, and then all at once something happens!

The earth, soddened and loosened by the late rains and the swelling of the river, has given way beneath her. She sways backwards——

In a second Wortley has caught her hand, but it is impossible to prevent her reaching the water. Providentially beneath the bank a huge boulder lies, and on this her right foot coming, gives her a certain support for the moment. Within that moment she feels two strong arms round her, and almost before she has time to realize her unpleasant position, she is standing beside Wortley once again quite safe, but extremely wet. The turbulent stream has gone over her shoes and stockings and reduced her pretty lace petticoat to a most unhappy state.

Surely under these circumstances one would have thought that she was deserving of nothing but commiseration. Wortley evidently thinks otherwise. The truth is she has frightened him out of his life. If *alone*, that swift full-tided river would very probably have caught and carried her along with it, in spite of all her struggles to—*death* perhaps. . . . And besides all that, he has not forgiven her her obstinacy in not stepping back when he had warned her of the insecurity of the bank.

"I hope you will take advice *next* time!" says he vigorously, holding her still by both arms, and looking as if he would dearly like to shake her. "What did you mean by dancing a jig on that bank when I told you how unsafe it was? What are you going to do now? You"—indignantly—"are wet through! And it serves you right too!"

He is giving her a scolding of the real good old-fashioned kind. It is *his* innings now, and he is going to make the most of his time. She has behaved abominably, and has given him a shock, and of course must be feeling subdued. Perhaps she will listen to reason at last!

He had not, however, allowed for the "eternal feminine" in her! Suddenly she wrenches herself free from him.

"Yes, I am!" says she. "And it is all your fault!" Can his ears be playing him false? *His* fault! "If you had not been so dreadfully rude and unkind to me, I should not have tried to get away from you. I am sure it was trying to get away from you that made me step backwards on that horrid bank!"

"Unkind!"

"Oh!" with quite a long-drawn anguish in her tone. "So unkind!"

Wortley, staring, wonders how she does it! *Such* anguish! If he had threatened to murder her, she could not regard him with greater reproach. And what had he done? His conscience clears him most valiantly, yet in spite of it, he feels himself growing, inch by inch, into a perfect monster of iniquity.

"What *did* I do?" demands he desperately.

"You know very well! *All day long* you have been

unkind to me." Suddenly, without a second's warning, she bursts into tears.

This is terrible.

"I give in," says Wortley frantically. "I'm the greatest brute alive. I'm anything you like—only don't go on like that."

"I don't"—sobbing—"want you to give in."

"Then what on earth *do* you want?" in a tone that savours of desperation.

"I think"—sobbing still—"you might guess."

"I can't!"

"Dry shoes and stockings then," indignantly. "I think you might have known that. My feet"—whimpering—"are cold and wet. I think you might have known that too!"

It is plain to him that her full belief is, that but for him her feet would *not* be wet and cold!

He smothers a groan of remonstrance, and drawing her arm through his, turns her right-about face, and homewards.

"We can talk it out later on," says he grimly. "Come back to the house now, and change your things."

But though Miss Prendergast goes with him, she weeps silently all the time, and refuses to speak. As a fact, she is consumed with chagrin. That terrible day on the beach when she had first met him has come back to her! Are her shoes and stockings to be always *en évidence* when she is with him?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"In our light, bitter world of wrong."

"It is quite hot still," says Cecilia, her hand upon the teapot. "How lovely. Let us have some more!"

She has come out to the terrace to welcome back the haymakers, having got (happily) rid of some of her elderly gossips, though not of all—Mrs. Cutforth-Boss,

1. The first part of the document is a list of names, which are arranged in two columns. The names are written in a cursive script, and some are underlined. The list appears to be a roster or a list of participants.

all of the horrid sex, and it is quite astonishing, as Maria remarks, what a long time they take to remove three bits of hay.

"Oh! that's a hairpin!" cries Mrs. Wilding suddenly. She puts up both her hands to defend herself, though, indeed, she need not have been afraid of any hairpin in the world, as all her fair tresses are her own. "Sir Stephen! what are you doing?"

"I beg your pardon," says Sir Stephen hurriedly; so hurriedly, indeed, that he digs the hairpin back into her head again, rather sharply. But Mrs. Wilding bears that thrust nobly; she has looked up and has seen Nell stepping out of the drawing-room window, and has at once known all about it. That's the good of a confirmed flirt like Mrs. Wilding!

It is quite a renovated Nell on whom Wortley is looking. The wet skirt has disappeared, a fresh one has taken its place, and beneath it the pretty shoes and stockings are quite dry and sparkling.

"The McGregors not come?" says she, tripping gaily towards Cecilia. She has taken a fancy to the plain Elspeth. "Elspeth said she would be here if possible by half-past five."

"Captain Stairs told me that, too," says Mrs. Chance. "No doubt they will come together very soon."

"Together?" says Cecilia; she lays down the teapot, and pushes the sugar-bowl to one side. The word is a question.

"Well, of course," says Mrs. Chance, with a simper, and her usual little hesitation, "he would hardly come without her."

"Why?" asks Mrs. Cutforth-Boss sharply.

Mrs. Chance smiles again and hesitates even more. She is in a bad temper. Alec having seen Nell go down to the river with Wortley, had gone home in a huff. And how had that girl managed to be there with Stephen?

"You shouldn't ask such delicate questions so openly," says she, her eyes every now and then darting little eager enquiries at Cecilia, who is still pushing the pretty silver trifles on the tea-tray from left to right and back again, with her eyes always lowered. ("She is listening, however," says Mrs. Chance to herself.) "Well, they are

engaged to be married, I hear! Have you not heard anything?"

There is a sharp, quick clatter amongst the spoons—the swerve of a woman's body, and the frou-frou of a woman's gown!

"It is not true!"

Cecilia's voice rings clear and high. She lets the last spoon fall clattering amongst the tea-cups. Her small beautiful face is thrown upwards, her lips are white—beneath them one could imagine her teeth clenched. Nell, whose own face has changed colour, glances at her furtively, in a very agony of fear. What is she going to do? What is going to happen? She turns her affrighted glance on Mickey, and that delectable youth steps at once into the breach.

"True!" says he, fine disdain in his tone. "Of course it isn't. Fancy Stairs engaged. The last man in the world to marry, I should say."

He looks straight at Cecilia, something in his quick, expressive Irish eyes rouses her, warns her. She draws in her breath sharply, and manages to laugh, in a stifled, somewhat too effusive fashion; but the crisis, at all events, is over.

"Not like me," goes on Mickey. "Who," dismally, "would marry to-morrow, only the distinctly 'Impossible she' won't have me."

Here he casts a languishing glance at Nell, who is still too frightened to even repel or play with it.

At this moment there is a movement at the end of the terrace, Mrs. Wilding and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss are saying some pleasant things to two or three people who are coming forward to greet their hostess. Mrs. Chance alone stands silent—waiting—looking at Mrs. Gaveston; and as eyes will, at times, presently hers compel Cecilia's to meet them. She smiles, and there is mockery in the smile. "Well? Do you believe now?" they seem to say.

The unspoken words seem to sink into Cecilia's heart.

Yes, he is here, and with Elspeth McGregor! Is it all true then what that woman had said? Is he going to sell his soul for gold, as she—*she* had sold hers? . . . And after all he had said last night.

She goes quickly up to Mrs. McGregor, brushing un-

steadily past Nell as she does so. Nell, who holds her for a moment, and tries to whisper something, but who is thrust aside almost passionately.

"Dear Mrs. McGregor, how *good* of you to come. And after all your fatigue."

The pretty voice rings softly as ever. A little hurried, perhaps, but quite as sweet as usual. There is no want of control in it now, or in the lovely face either.

"And you, too, Elspeth"—Mrs. Gaveston has gone a step farther—"you are wonderful; you look just as fresh as though you had not been up so many hours! And so happy, too! But perhaps," with charming meaning, "it is memories of last night that make you look so happy."

"Of course!" says Miss McGregor who, if she has a plain face, has a very gracious mind. "For last night we owe you a debt of gratitude. It would have made anyone happy—you think so, too, Philip?"

She turns to Captain Stairs, who is quite an old friend of hers and her people; to Cecilia her voice sounds appropriate. She stands still waiting for Stairs' reply. It comes at last.

"It was one of the happiest evenings of my life," says he. This was meant for Cecilia, but Cecilia, with her eyes bent on Elspeth, does not know that. She moves slowly away.

Stairs follows her.

"This morning—" begins he. She checks him by a gesture of her pretty hand. "This morning was beautiful," says she. "This afternoon is still more charming. How happy we are in our weather in spite of all our foreign friends may say."

She smiles at him; she does not look at him, and turns in her light fashion from him to her next guest.

Stairs left thus stranded, gives his mind a free course! What has he done then? What has happened? Her coldness is beyond question. Has she regretted—been overwhelmed by nervous fears?

Leaning against the wall of the house, he tries to work out the problem, but fails. Could she be offended with him because he failed to keep his appointment this morning? because, when he did appear, it was with Nell? Somebody tripping past him, rouses him from

his reflections. It is Mr. Nobbs, who has just arrived, and who is on his way to speak to Miss McGregor.

The little man's face is all aglow with the joy of a quotation that has just occurred to him, and which he flatters himself will be really artistically appropriate. Miss McGregor's red hair, her Scottish features, and her name have all inspired him.

Stepping briskly up to her, as she stands talking to Mickey, he tilts his little chin, lays his head to one side like an elderly robin, and squeaks gaily—

“ ‘Stands Scotland where it did?’ ”

This touching allusion to her nationality might have received the applause it merits—but alas! for poor Nobbs, Mickey is on the spot.

“Not much!” says that spoiler of genius. “What!” turning to the disgusted Nobbs with the air of true amazement. “Haven't you heard? Not *heard*? Why, where have you been? It seems that poor old Scotland moved on a yard or two last night, and fell right over into the North Sea. Awful catastrophe, isn't it? People say—but people would say *anything*, that the poor creature had a little—just a *little* too much—you know!” This sounds personal, and Nobbs makes a furious disclaimer. “Anyway, it plunged right in, and has never been heard of since. Frightful loss of life. Five dead and twenty wounded, I hear: and the poor little baby not expected to recover. I hear too that Lord Rosebery is very much cut up about it, and the Queen inconsolable. A couple of divers have been sent down to look into matters, but it appears there is little hope of——”

Mr. Nobbs at this point beats an indignant retreat, and Mickey turns a smiling eye on Nell.

“Had the laugh on him there,” says he.

“And all to yourself,” returns she severely. “I don't believe there is in Europe so silly a person as you are.”

“Perhaps there is in Asia?” says Mr. McNamara, hopefully.

Mrs. McGregor is saying good-bye to Cecilia. She has two other visits to pay (both to people who seldom receive visits—she is the kindest being in the world), and she really *must* run; and Elspeth is coming with

her—but Philip. "You need not come, Philip, you would only be bored, and you can walk home through the woods."

Mrs. McGregor carries off the good Elspeth with her, and presently Mrs. Chance and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss disappear too, the former having manœuvred herself into a seat in Maria's carriage. Of the guests of the afternoon only Sir Stephen and Stairs remain.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"A little sorrow, a little pleasure,
Fate metes us from the dusty measure
That holds the date of all of us."

GAVESTON, turning in his slow, kindly way to Stairs, renews to him his earlier invitation.

"I hope you remember that when your visit to the McGregors is over, you have promised to come to us."

There is a distinct pause. Stairs so far controls himself that he does not look at Cecilia, and he is conscious that his heart is beating like a sledge-hammer. What is he to say—how to act? There is no time for thought. The invitation has already been accepted, and now, how to get out of it? A certainty that he *must* get out of it is the only thing he is sure of. To eat this man's salt is impossible, and yet—

"I am leaving Mrs. McGregor's on Thursday next," says he slowly. "But I am afraid that after all I shall not be able to accept your kind——"

"You mustn't say that," says Gaveston, in his calm, hospitable way. "A week at least you can spare us. Such an old friend of my wife's is doubly welcome."

"A week——" begins Stairs.

"A couple of days then. Come, that is settled. Cecilia," calling to his wife, who is standing far down on the terrace with her back half turned to them—"Captain Stairs is coming to us on Thursday."

"Yes?" Cecilia so far moves as to give them one

cheek to look at, and half a glimpse of a flashing eye. "So glad!" After this she goes back to her old position.

It seems all so lightly settled, so easily arranged. Stairs would have made even now a further protest, but that Nell standing over there with Mickey and Sir Stephen, suddenly calls to her brother-in-law—

"Peter, there are still some of the yellow raspberries left in the lower garden. Will you come and eat them? We"—with a dainty gesture that includes her two companions—"are going."

"It sounds tempting," says Gaveston. "Will you come, Cis?"

Cecilia nods acquiescence.

Her face is very white.

"The dew is falling," says she, holding out her hands as if to catch it.

"That will make the raspberries all the sweeter," says Nell; she leans forward. "Philip, will you come with me?" There is suppressed anxiety in her tone, and involuntarily Sir Stephen looks at her.

Stairs smiles and goes to her; and Nell heading the troop with him, all start for the fruit garden.

But once in, they get separated. The raspberry beds are many and far between, and presently, what with diving here and diving there, in search of the fast dying-out fruit, the party is entirely disorganized. Stairs had been lost sight of, and Mickey, who was now with Nell and Wortley, and to whom Nell indeed had seemed to cling, much to Mickey's surprise and pride, was summoned back by the butler to answer a telegram from his mother, who was most anxious to know whether he would like his socks red or pale blue for the winter. She is evidently thinking of knitting them, poor woman, and much gratitude should be hers, but I regret to say, that the telegram, instead of heightening Mr. McNamara's filial feelings, drives him not only half mad with rage, but into the most terrible language. Flinging down his last newly-found raspberry, he rushes towards the house. Gaveston who, in a raspberry row with his wife and Stairs, had seen the telegram brought to Mickey, and the reception thereof, had at once decided that old Mrs. McNamara was dead at last, and had im-

mediately followed him to give him all the support he could, under the sad circumstances.

We prefer to draw a veil over Mr. McNamara's reception of his condolences. It was a loud one and very profane.

Meantime Nell, to her discomfiture, now finds herself alone with Wortley.

The others have gone far down the opposite raspberry bank and are quite out of sight. Neither party would have heard much of the other all the time, except for Mickey, whose mildest mirth can always be heard half a mile away. How Nell now longs for this despised hilarity.

"I'm glad to see you've changed your shoes and stockings," says Wortley, glancing at the dainty little foot that is emerging from beneath the short serge skirt. "But I think it is a little rash of you to come out after your wetting."

"You are right," says Nell quickly. "I'll go back." She starts precipitately for the house. What a splendid opportunity of getting away, and nothing to offend him about it either. It was his own suggestion.

"But—one moment."

"Moments are fatal in these cases," says she. She edges away another inch or two. "Perhaps I'll die, if I delay."

Wortley bursts out laughing, and with a quickness she is not prepared for, catches her arm.

"What a little humbug you are!" says he. "Come back here, and eat your raspberries. You know as well as I do, that you are not going to die of your late wetting."

She looks up at him. He has let his hand slip from her arm down to her fingers, and he is now holding the latter in a very light clasp. Her look is provocative.

"Perhaps not of my wetting," says she, "but one dies of other things than that. Worse things—*far* worse!"

"For instance——?"

"Ill-treatment!"

"Ah, tell me his name!" says he.

At this they both laugh.

"Do you know," he continues presently, "I have been

wanting to say something to you all day, but I had not the courage."

"The courage! *You?*"

"Yes. Even I! Tyrant and Oppressor, as I am, with a big O! still I cower before you! This admission ought to pave my way for me—ought to open the path of your mercy to me!"

"What do you want to say?"

"I want you to take back that parasol. It is the Pipe of Peace in our case. Can't you bring yourself to accept it?"

She shakes her head vigorously.

"I don't smoke," says she.

"You *will* take it back, however," persists he, ignoring her nonsense.

"No! No! *Never!* I couldn't!"

"Still, I wish you would."

"It is impossible."

Sir Stephen sighs.

"What a fraud you are!" says he. "You *look* so good-hearted, and yet—— Well, I suppose I must only give it to old Miss Miggs, the laundress."

"To Miss Miggs?" Nell makes a little gesture of protest. "To her—oh, don't!"

"Why not? Either to her or into the fire."

"The fire first. It was—lovely!"

"Was it?" says Sir Stephen. "That's strange! I'm not a judge of parasols, I admit, but, do you know, when I was buying it, I said to myself, it looked just like you!" A pause. "Must I give it to Miss Miggs?"

"There was an alternative," in an uncompromising tone. "You can burn it."

"To-night," says he.

Silence follows this, and a fresh descent upon the raspberries. His overture has been rejected, and Wortley, with a feeling of anger against himself, for having so far tried to melt her to his mood, determines on saying nothing more until Gaveston or Mickey come back to give a grateful turn to their discourse. At all events, she shall be the one to speak first, which, of course, means that speech is not a thing to be expected until the arrival of some third person.

Into the very midst of these most sombre determina-

tions falls a distraction. Right underneath his very nose a little palm is thrust with three big raspberries upon it—three lovely raspberries—yet the beauty of the whole three put together is not so great as the beauty of the little hand in which they rest.

"Eat them," says Nell.

"Is it a peace offering?"

He stoops, and eats them off the dainty dish that might truly be set before any king in all the world, and having eaten them, and still with the "dainty dish" within his grasp, he bends again, and presses a hasty kiss upon that lovely plate.

Nell does not withdraw her hand, but she blushes rosy red. A charming red. Wortley, still holding her hand, and looking at her, thinks he has never seen her look so pretty.

"Her beauty was new colour to the air,
And music to the silent many birds."

That she is surprised is beyond question. Astonishment is portrayed in the large eyes that are resting on him.

"Why did you do that?" asks she at last.

Wortley laughs.

"On my word, I don't know."

Miss Prendergast takes back her hand, and shrugs her shoulders slightly.

"I do—I do!" declares he eagerly, and with contrition.

"It was because——"

He hesitates.

"Well?" She is evidently determined to have her answer. But the surprise has given place to amusement, and her lips are now parted in a mischievous smile. "Is it so hard to say?" asks she.

"I may say it then?"

"How can I tell? What do I know of your thoughts?" She laughs outright: and then, "You"—maliciously—"are afraid!"

"I am!" giving in upon the spot in a most craven fashion. "If your wrath were to descend upon me again to-day, I should be indeed undone. Give me permission, and then I'll speak."

"Oh, coward!" cries she. "No, no—there shall be no permission. And you may keep your answer."

"I won't!" says he, with sudden recklessness. "I'll risk the half of it. It was because your hand is the prettiest one I know."

"*That* a half?" says she. "Why, I call it a handsome whole. What more *could* you say?"

He looks at her intently.

"Is that another question? Do you still dare me?" asks he, in a low tone. His air has grown suddenly intensified. Nell draws back, laughing lightly always, but her colour has again risen, dyeing her face softly, even as far as the broad brow.

"Fie! Would I dare my guardian?" says she. She draws still farther from him, and Wortley comes back to the moment with a laugh as light as her own. What on earth had he been going to say. He doesn't know.

They are both a little silent as they go back to the house.

CHAPTER XL.

"When first we met we did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master;
Of more than common friendliness
When first we met we did not guess.
Who could foretell this sore distress,
This irretrievable disaster,
When first we met?—We did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master."

CECILIA and Stairs—reluctantly on Cecilia's part—had gone up the garden, and from it had passed into the little pleasaunce called the "White Square," because on it all the sun that ever shines, shines brightest. A little spot it is, walled round and lined with giant beeches, and with high banks of mossy grass that make luxurious seats. In the trees the birds are singing lazily bed-songs for their little ones, that now are surely old enough to sing their evening hymn for them.

selves. A gentle wind is playing on the leaves, filled with a delicate saturation from the ocean, far down there.

"A faint sea-fragrance dwells upon the air,
Autumn's enchantment layeth hold on me,
Stirring the sense to vaguest pageantry,
To fitful memories of days so fair,
As no days ever were."

"As no days ever were!" Stairs, who has been quoting these charming lines to himself, stops short with a little sudden pang at his heart, and looks at Cecilia.

But Cecilia's eyes are over there—over, where behind one of the biggest beech trees, a small and beloved form is bending.

"Looking for rabbits, Geoff?" cries she.

Geoff extricates himself from the mound of loose earth that he and his terrier have been casting upon the world, and turning to her a face bright, excited:

"It's down here!" cries he.

"A rabbit? Oh, Geoff! a poor little rabbit!"

"'Tisn't a rabbit at all," screams he in his high treble. "It's a nasty rat."

"Never mind the rat. Come here."

Cecilia is glad of this happy interlude, and calls to the boy eagerly. The conversation between her and Stairs is growing a little strained.

Geoffrey, giving his little terrier a cuff, as a command to proceed, a perfectly useless admonition, as, a second later, she has her head in the hole again and is now scrabbling up the earth as hard as ever she can, comes up a little reluctantly to his mother.

"This is Captain Stairs—you know him," says Cecilia to the child. Her tone is so different from the one he knows and loves, that the child glances at her from under his long dark lashes as if questioning her.

"Say how d'ye do, Geoff."

Geoff advances with such evident dislike, however, that Stairs has little difficulty about waving him off.

"That will do," says he, drawing himself up stiffly, pushing the boy back as it were. And the boy, gladly accepting his terms, turns, and calling loudly to the terrier, runs quickly down the garden path out of sight.

"Why did you repulse him like that?" asks Cecilia,

passionately. "You have always hated him. I saw that from the first. What has my child done to you?"

"You answer your own question," says Stairs coldly. "He is your child."

"Is that a reason why you should insult him? I saw his little face as he drew back—I can see it still. And he—so used to love *always*!—what could he know of dislike unless you taught him? What have you done to him?"

Her voice breaks. All the grief—the strange terror of the past few hours now declares itself in a flood of tremulous anger. Poor Cecilia! who has never learned in all her short and thoughtless life how to be angry before, is now troubled and distressed by this horrible emotion that has so suddenly fallen into her days.

"What have I done to *you*?" says Stairs shortly. "That's the real question."

"To me!" she turns, to look coldly at him, but all at once she breaks down. Unaccustomed to discipline of any sort, this trial is too much for her.

"I *must* speak. I *will*!" cries she. "Why—*why* did you not tell me that you were going to marry Miss McGregor?"

"Elspeth McGregor!"

"Ah!" sharply. "How easily her name comes to you. And she"—bitterly—"calls you Phil. Oh!" beating her hands together, "I could have killed her as she said it. And you!" She turns upon him a pallid face, out of which all the light has gone. "You who called *me* false!"

There is a dead silence. Something in his face perhaps answers her. Going to him, she lays her hands on his.

"It was a lie?" asks she, in an agonised tone, her eyes on his.

"Must you have an answer? How could you ever want one to such a question?" says he simply. "Do you believe that I shall ever marry?" He takes her hands and presses them against his breast. "As for Elspeth McGregor, she is to be married next May to a man in the 12th—a very good fellow, and *almost* worthy of her."

"Is that true?"

He looks at her. There is terrible reproach in the look.

"How could you have dreamed the other true?"

Does she understand? He is looking at her, trying to read her; and she is looking back at him, her eyes on his. But what do her eyes betray?

"O! tell me less, or tell me more,
Sweet eyes with mystery at the core."

Suddenly the eyes awake. She lifts her head and breaks into a soft, tremulous laugh.

"Oh! I am so happy!" cries she. "I am happy again. But that last hour—I!" She trembles, and her eyes fill with tears. Then she makes a sudden little gesture as if throwing something from her—something hateful. "No. I shan't think of it ever again."

She looks very young and very inconsequent as she does this. A quick fear for her fills Stairs' heart. So eager to escape from pain—so childishly determined to thrust it from her. So quickly happy after so grievous an hour.

Her soft drenched eyes are now smiling at him—so are her lips. She has forgotten, as usual, both past and future, in the gladness of the present. So easily swayed by pain and joy, how will it fare with her in the days that lie before her? It seems impossible that the calm affection she feels for her husband will suffice to keep her thoughtless feet steady on the road of life. If she had some one near her always—some one she loved—

He breaks off suddenly. "That way madness lies."

"Why aren't *you* happy?" asks Cecilia all at once. She has been studying him.

"Happiness?" bitterly. "Where is it to be found?"

She glances at him reproachfully.

"I am here!" says she softly, as though reminding him with the sweetest rebuke of a fact he should have known.

"You—you—you!" He draws his breath sharply. Then, with some vehemence: "Have you ever thought how all this is going to end?"

"Yes, yes; I know," says she, making again that swift gesture as if to ward off something, or else to put

it from her. "You will go, but not now—not," regarding him anxiously, "for a long, long time."

"I shall go almost immediately."

"Oh, no! You," sharply, "can't do that. You have promised to come and stay with us for awhile. I *heard* you say that. You said you would come next Thursday."

"I shall not come, however."

"No?" She looks at him as if not believing. "Not even for a few days?"

He shakes his head. His face is very pale.

"But *why*, Phil?" she bursts out impatiently, and then stops, and then goes on again impatiently, "Oh, I needn't ask; I know what you mean. But do you really, *really*, think it wrong for us to see each other?"

"I don't know what is right or wrong"—gloomily. "I only know I cannot stand much more of this."

He rises from his seat beside her on the bank, and walks to and fro, his troubled eyes fixed upon the ground.

"Ah! That means that you *do* think it wrong," says she mournfully. "You say to yourself that because I am married, I must not again be glad when I am with you. But is that just—is it fair? Because I am Peter's wife must I then not be happy when I am talking to you? No, no," as he would have broken sternly into her speech, "I have thought it all out. Every"—emphatically—"bit of it. And I cannot see what is wrong about it. I have tried and I have failed to see. I know only that you are my dearest friend—that I love you—and that it is too harsh a judgment that would tell me I must not therefore be with you. Can't you look at it like that?" She waits as if entreating a kind answer from him, but answer there is none. "You can't, then?"

She leans towards him, her hands twined round her knees, her eyes uplifted to his. The last rays of the slowly fading sunshine are glinting on her hair, dyeing it into even a greater glory. "I can," says she reluctantly, in a grieved sort of way and with a sort of wonder at herself. "Do you know, Phil," anxiously, "I have sometimes thought that I am *wanting* in certain ways?"

She looks at him with some expectation in her gaze.

At *him* who can see nothing wanting in her; to whom she is the one sweet, perfect thing upon this earth.

He returns her gaze despairingly. He dares not break the silence. To speak at this moment is to give full sway to all the passion of a lifetime.

"I'll tell you how it seems to me," says she. She sighs and turns her eyes away from his. "Why it seems *unfair*! Isn't it unfair that we two, you and I, who have been done out of all the good of our lives, should still further be coerced—be driven to cast from us the little last, small sweetness that remains to us?"

"Nothing remains to us."

"Oh, it does—it does," cries she affrightedly. "Why do you speak like that? I *won't* give up all—I can't. And you are just like all the rest of the world, so *sure* of your opinion—so cold. In spite of you"—miserably—"I have still something left me. I can see you—hear you—and you can hear me."

His very heart is bleeding. Oh! to take her in his arms, to carry her away—away from all the world . . . and so to desecrate her—his idol!

"Cecilia, think," says he with intense agitation, "you are married; you——"

"I know I am Peter's wife," says she. But gently and with a subdued but glad certainty, "I love *you*!"

"*Cissy*!"

He takes a step towards her, but the perfect faith that shines within her eyes, her sad belief in him, checks him.

"Is that so dreadful a thing to say? Your face tells me it is. Everything," says she, her voice quivering, "seems dreadful now. But you *know* it, Phil, and what is the good of being silent"—even that first principle has not come home to her!—"It," in a little broken way that goes to his heart, "it comforts me to say it . . . *out loud*!"

Her eyes have again grown misty; tears trouble them. And the evening wind, rising as night comes on, is rushing through her pretty locks, ruffling them, playing with them, and making them lie with riotous confusion across her white forehead. The drooping branches of a beech tree are hanging over her.

"You *will* come if even for a day?"

"This is madness," says Stairs, bursting suddenly the bonds of speech. "You may as well hear first as last, that I am leaving this place altogether on Thursday." It is a terrible determination, thought on for some days, and now at a last moment made sure.

"Altogether!"

She brings herself to her feet slowly. He can see that she is trembling.

"Oh! no, Phil! Oh! *no!* You couldn't do it." She goes closer to him and tries to smile—such a pitiful smile. "You are trying to tease me, aren't you? You used to tease me in the old days—do you remember? You must go back to India *some* day. I"—with a little catch of her breath—"I know that. But until then you will stay . . . in England, at all events, where I can—you *will* stay?"

"Don't," says he sharply. "Good Heavens! do you think I am a *stone*? I shall leave this on Thursday."

"Go then." But even as she utters these scornful words, she looks at him, and all the lovely misery of her face is plain.

"Why do you look at me like that?" exclaims he. "Don't you know it is for your sake I am going?"

A little sunshine disturbs the grief of her eyes.

"If that is all," says she, "stay."

"If *you* can bear the torture, *I* cannot," declares he fiercely. To accept Gaveston's hospitality, with this madness on him—

"Well, go—go." Her voice is very low, and all at once he knows that she is crying, and at the same moment he is at her feet.

"My darling! My delight! *Cissy!*" His arms are around her. "I will do anything you wish. I will stay with you. My heart—my soul, do not cry?"

"You will stay?"

"Yes."

"You will come here for just a few days, before we lose each other for ever?"

"Yes," with a groan.

Mrs. Gaveston sighs with a sort of sad content.

"Now you are my own Phil again," says she. "Do you know, Phil, I never knew how much I cared for you until you came back this time? Wasn't that strange?"

"I would to God you had never known," says he. "Darling, darling girl, have you thought?"

"I'm always thinking," she stands back from him, her hands in his, and her face alight with joy. She seems to have forgotten everything but the fact of his having given in about his going. "And it is always of *you*!"

She smiles at him, and her lips widen. All at once she bursts into a little rippling laugh, that has some tears in it, but far more mirth.

"On Thursday then you will come?" cries she triumphantly. "How lovely! And see, Phil! There can't be a bit of harm in it, can there? It is only that we are fond of each other. No more. Nothing more! And we can't help that, can we? Oh, what walks we shall have on Thursday and the day after. They shall be many, Phil! I have ever so many places to show you."

She breaks off, her eyes having caught the darkening tints of the sky.

"It is getting late," says she in an injured tone. "How soon it gets late sometimes. We must go back to the house. Come, Phil," holding out her hand to him. "Come. We must run for it. I've got to dress for dinner yet."

CHAPTER XLI.

"The first point of wisdom is to discern that which is false, the second to know that which is true."

GAVESTON had been crossing the hall as Nell and Wortley returned to the house, and had carried off the latter to the dining-room to have a whisky and soda before starting for his homeward walk. Wortley had made a slight hesitation about accepting this friendly offer at first, but when Nell disappeared up the hall and into a room beyond, he had changed his mind and thought well of the whisky and soda. She might come back again for one thing, but she didn't, and he is now far on his way to The Towers.

Nell had gone straight to the library first, expecting

to find Cecilia there, expecting the gay, hurried little questions as to what she had been doing all the afternoon, what people had said to her, and she to them. But Cecilia was not in the library, nor in the morning-room, nor in the drawing, nor in her own room.

It is now growing quite dusk, and Nell, with a frightened feeling at her heart, comes back to the library, and, standing in the eastern window, that gives the best view of the approach to the house from the orchard, feels a chill gather round her heart.

Where is Cecilia? How imprudent her staying out so late. Her growing fear about Philip's fatal fascination for Cecilia now lends terror to her thoughts. It is just seven o'clock. There is barely time to dress for dinner. Why—*why* does she not come in? If Peter should ask—should question. . . . Perhaps Sir Stephen will keep him engaged for a little while.

Peter coming in, dispels this hope. She turns slowly from the window. Will he ask? If he does. . . . Her heart sinks within her——

All at once relief comes. There is a joyous voice from the verandah.

"Why, what a little owl you look," cries Cecilia, pushing the silken curtains aside and springing into the room. "A little bird of ill omen! How your face is set! And on this lovely evening, too. Oh!" with a rapturous indrawing of her breath, "was there *ever* so lovely an evening?"

She is looking brilliant. Her eyes—her cheeks are on fire; her whole air is filled with the first fresh madness of youth.

Gaveston, leaning against the mantelpiece, regards her with an appreciative gaze—a gaze that has the gentle devotion of years in it.

"What a rash hour for little girls to be out," says he, smiling. His eyes are full of admiration of the lovely, quickly breathing thing before him. "Do you know, Cecilia, you are nothing but a little girl still? You look just as young as when you married me, six years ago. Time," with a comically reproachful look, "like all the rest of us, has evidently succumbed to you—he has fallen in love with you. He spares you."

He laughs and, going up to her, lays his hands upon

her shoulders, and in the little way she knows so well, shakes her tenderly. She laughs too, but as he stoops to kiss her, she evades him, laughing always and prettily, but presently, with determination, she slips from beneath his hands, and steps behind the table nearest her.

"How the perfume of those roses comes to one," says Nell gaily. To herself her gaiety is so artificial that she stops dead short, waiting for the others to comment on it. But evidently they have not noticed her. The very breath of the roses is filling the room, and Peter, as if attracted by it, goes out to the verandah. They can hear him whistling.

Cecilia stands by the table, drumming upon it with her pretty, slender fingers as if playing on some imaginary piano, and Nell, from the depths of a lounging chair, watches her openly, anxiously. What is Cecilia thinking of—what symphony is she playing—what heart's tune? What a strange, *rapt* smile is on her lips!

All at once something intermingles with Peter's whistling—it is a child's voice—sweet and happy. Cecilia starts as if shot, and turns. That strange smile is still upon her lips, but now it looks as though it were frozen there.

The little voice comes nearer, prattling gaily. Peter is talking to the child—expostulating with him, telling him he ought to be in the middle of his beauty sleep hours ago, and the pretty voice is explaining: "He couldn't go to bed until he said good-night to his mammy, and his mammy was so long coming in—and——"

They have both stepped into the room now. The boy running beside his father, who has a most artistic, loosely-put together wreath of roses in his hand.

"Who is *this* for?" asks Peter, holding it up, and asking the question of his little son.

"For mammy!" cries the child excitedly.

"Right. It is for Saint Cecilia! Did you know your mother was a saint? All Saint Cecílias are crowned with roses. Come, we shall decorate *our* saint, you and I."

The strange, new smile is dead now. Cecilia's face is ghastly, she moves back a little into the shade, clutching the table as if for support. Nell half rises as if to

go up to her—her knees trembling beneath her—but her distress is broken in upon by the boy, who runs to his mother, and cast his little loving arms around her.

"I won't have my mammy made a saint," says he, casting an indignant look back at his father. "Saints go to Heaven. My mammy *shan't* go to Heaven—ever—ever."

Cecilia clutches the boy to her wildly, stifling his face against her breast. An awful fear has caught her. Once, twice before she felt it—but only as a passing cloud might be felt. But the child!—is her own child condemning her? "Never to Heaven——" *Never!* Where is she going then? Oh, God! no—no! Not to hell!

She knows a moment later how stupid such thoughts are! The absurd paroxysm is over! Why, what *has* she done? The face she lifts from her late convulsive clasping of the boy is very white, but quite composed.

"He wouldn't let his mammy go from him—would he? No! Not even for a moment. Not even when he is obliged to go to bed, because the cruel night compels him. Well, then, come, and she'll put him to bed herself, if 'for this night only!'"

She carries the boy away with her. He, clinging to her, and she with her arm around his neck. So sweet a pair!

Nell looks thoughtfully after her as she goes. Then a sudden determination comes to her—she moves towards the door. The determination has turned her hands and face as cold as ice.

"You look ill, Nell," says her brother-in-law kindly, catching a glimpse of her face as she passes him. "What is it?"

"Nothing. . . . Nothing very much. My head aches a little."

"Go to Cecilia, she will do you good."

"Yes. I will go to Cecilia."

CHAPTER XLII.

"Good name, in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls."

SLOWLY, step by step, Nell goes up the broad oak stairs, from the walls of which many Gaveston Dames look down upon her. All dull—all abominably plain, to tell the truth, but *sans reproche*. Not one solitary volatile glance could be got out of the lot of them, even had they combined all their forces to produce that effect.

Nell sighs softly as she looks at them. Perhaps it is well to be dull and plain. If so, things will fare but badly with the latest lady of the Park.

Glancing into the nursery, she finds Cecilia is not there. Geoffrey is, however, and makes towards her with a most lamentable disregard of the decencies. His delightful little rounded limbs are innocent of covering—he is dripping from elbow and ears and nose: he has in fact just sprung from his bath to bid her a fresh good-night. She receives him, drips and all, into her embrace—then beats a hasty retreat.

As she closes the nursery door behind her, she hesitates, and looks longingly down the staircase that she has just come up. *Why go on?* She had hoped to meet Cecilia in the nursery, to have broken her meaning to her there—with the child to help her cause—but now. . . . Now it must be done in cold blood. Oh no! she cannot say such things to Cissy—she half turns as if to go down again to the drawing-room—but her eyes fall upon the "Dames," and as if with one consent they all seem to wave her back—to forbid her turning back from the plough. It seems to Nell in her nervous state as if they are telling her that the house is theirs! And that it had to be kept as *they* had kept it, pure—sweet—fragrant! with no dark mists to choke the clearness of its air!

She turns as if in obedience to these dead orders, but once again hesitates. To arraign her own sister. To bring her to the blush perhaps, or perhaps to be driven

from her presence. It was an ordeal that would have been too much for most girls, but after a desperate moment, Nell conquers her irresolution, and goes straight to Cecilia's door. Conscience had proved her master.

Cecilia is sitting before a sparkling fire, her hands twisted behind her head. She starts to her feet as Nell, without knocking, comes into the room. Neither of the sisters ever dreamed of knocking at each other's doors. They knew they were always welcome—more than welcome.

"Come in, Nellie." Her manner is as startled as her abrupt uprising. It gives Nell the wretched impression that she has been expecting this moment with some one—not with her—that she has been preparing herself for it, most inefficiently as the sequel proves.

"How pale you are!" says Cecilia, whose own face is now quite colourless. "Come to the fire. What," slowly and not looking at her, "is it that has distressed you?"

"You," cries the girl, with sudden passion and with parched lips. She does not come to the fire, as desired, but stands looking at Cecilia, her heart choking her throat. "Why—*why* did you stay out so long?"

"Is that it?" says Cecilia, in the sad voice of a child who is in fault. "You are angry with me then. I knew you would be. I have seen of late, twice—twice," repeating it as if thinking—"no, *three* times that you were angry with me; was it"—anxiously—"so *very* late?"

So sweetly she says all this, that Nell's heart dies within her. Cecilia is looking frightened, and a little sad, too, and worst of all things, forsaken. Is she—Nell—to forsake her? she, her sister—her attitude goes to the girl's very soul. And how well she has taken it too! She might so easily have taken it another way. She might, in her rôle of elder sister, have ordered Nell out of the room. But Cecilia had not done that.

Cecilia indeed had done nothing. Gentle, yielding, always a little uncertain, she would have been the last to give an order to anyone. She had no thought about asserting herself, she had never dreamt of ordering Nell out of the room, or of being indignant—a pose that nine out of every ten women under the circumstances would have taken.

"Oh, *angry*! How could you think I was angry with

you? I have no right," says Nell, "but"—she tries hard to keep her tone from trembling—"it *was* late."

"Was it?" says Cecilia—she pauses. To Nell it seems that she is looking backwards into the cause of her lateness; and as she looks her eyes brighten. Nell draws her breath sharply. What is she seeing? "It didn't feel late," she goes on. "It seemed to me that I came in *so soon*, and Peter—Peter saw nothing! You must remember"—feverishly—"that Peter saw nothing! You," with a little short laugh, "you must be more of a prude than Peter."

"Cissy, let me speak." Nell's voice is low, she seems to struggle with it, "I have lately thought——"

She stops, feeling faint, and clutches the back of the carved chair behind her, as if demanding support from it; she evidently feels that it is impossible to her to go on. How is she to put into dreadful words, the still more dreadful fear that is consuming her?

"I have thought too," says Cecilia, slowly. "Sometimes I have thought—oh, no"—breaking off passionately—"oh, no, Nellie, I must not talk to *you* like this."

"Go on," says Nell. What is there in the young voice? Sternness? Grief?

"*Must* I go on? You will let me then? you will listen? Oh, Nellie!" She sinks into a chair, and holds out her arms to the girl to come close to her. It is a childish act, the action of a child who wants someone to come and bear her punishment with her, and soften down the offence. "It is this. I have no one to speak to but you, and sometimes—you will forgive me, Nellie, won't you?" with nervous horror of reproach, "but... It is a fancy of mine. Of course"—she pauses, and a laugh, sad and most imperfect, breaks from her. A laugh that no one with an ounce of feeling could believe in. "A mad fancy! But I *have* thought of late that—that—I am in *love with Philip*!"

A dead silence ensues. Nell not moving, Cecilia goes on hurriedly and almost violently.

"Of course you are surprised, and of course it is all nonsense; I shouldn't have suggested such a terrible thing to a child like you. But there was no one else And it isn't true as I have told you, it was a mere mad fancy. It——" she breaks off suddenly and looks

at Nell, who is now white to her very lips. "It is a lie—do you understand? A lie!"

Then all at once her face changes.

"Oh, my God!" cries she. "There is no lie, it is true, true, all of it! I do love him!"

Silence again follow this. And then again very slowly, more deliberately this time Cecilia repeats her terrible assertion. "I love him!" The words now, however, seem to fall from her in silken syllables. There is a delight in her voice, a certain triumph that frightens Nell more than all that has gone before. She covers her face with her hands, and bursts into bitter weeping.

"It can't—it can't be true!" cries she wildly. "Oh, Cissy! Oh, darling, *think!*"

"*Don't!*" says Cecilia, almost fiercely. The late delight is gone from it, and now the pretty, soft, cooing voice, is sounding strangely hoarse. The girl's tears seem to crush her—to condemn her. She looks at Nell standing there sobbing, shivering, and feels herself judged and cast aside.

"Why do you cry?" says she, "what have I done? Nothing—nothing—except to love him. What harm can there be in loving? How can one keep from it? Is one's heart a mere machine to be controlled at will? Love is what we want always, what we seek after. Heaven itself speaks for it."

"For such love as *this?*" asks Nell, still sobbing wildly.

"Oh, don't, don't, don't! Your tears are driving me *mad*. Oh, Nell! Oh! my pretty girl, you are right and I am wrong. And what lessons I am teaching you! God forbid you should ever learn them."

She burst out crying herself now, and with a little rush Nell goes to her and flings her arms round her, pressing her to her heart.

"Yet you condemn me, you think me wicked," says Cecilia, clinging to her. There seems refuge and comfort in the clasp of these strong young arms.

"I think of you only as my own Cissy, my very *heart*," says poor Nell brokenly. "Oh, darling, remember every word I say is for your good. I think of no one else. This Philip, what is he to you? He can never be anything. *Never!* And Peter—why, Peter is worth a thousand of him. See now, Cissy," trying to

speaking calmly, persuasively, but crying miserably all the time, "is it worth while to break *your* heart, and Peter's heart, and *my* heart, all because——" her sobs choke her.

"I shall only break one heart," says Cecilia slowly. Her sharp burst of crying is over now. She looks *almost* her age, as she stands, still holding Nell, and with tender fingers trying with her handkerchief to dry the girl's eyes.

"Ah! you will—you will! If Peter should ever hear of this——"

"He cannot—he shall not. Nell"—blanching—"it is only you—and you will not betray. . . ."

"Peter cannot be blind for ever."

"He can. He must!"

"Why was *I* not blind then? *I* knew. *I* felt."

"True." She falls silent after this, and ponders for a minute or two. Then, "Nell"—with a wild, quick hope in her tone—"that looks as if Peter did not really love me! Doesn't it? People who *really* love are always the first to see. Eh? Perhaps Peter—only *fancied* he loved me."

Nell makes a gesture that has anger in it.

"Do as you will," says she. "But do not seek to disparage you husband. You know in your soul, Cecilia, that Peter loves you with all his heart. Do not," she hesitates, and goes on bravely, "try to escape from your own conscience, by seeking to cast a slur upon another's. That is not right, Cissy. No good can come of that. You know—you *know* that Peter loves you."

"Yes—yes," says Cecilia faintly, giving in as usual, and without the slightest trace of ill-feeling. "But I—I wish he didn't!"

It seems so hopeless! Nell's tears break forth afresh. What is to be the end of it all?

"Oh! poor, *poor* Peter!" says she. "Cissy"—desperately—"I heard him ask Philip to come and stay here on Thursday next—to stay for a week. But you will not let him come, will you? You will tell him—tell him something that will prevent his accepting the invitation. You *will* now—won't you? Oh, *darling* Cissy"—falling at her feet, and clasping her round the waist—"you will."

"How can I tell a guest he is unwelcome?"

"Ah! this is trifling with it?" cries Nell, springing to her feet. "Say you *will* not. Tell the truth!"

"I seem to be always telling you the truth," says Cecilia, with strange reproach in her voice. "I'll tell it now again—I *cannot*! He is going away soon, Nell—for ever. He refused the invitation here—but I persuaded him to come. I want to be happy for a few, *few* days out of all my life. He is coming. I shall not tell him to stay away."

"I told you," says Nell, in a stifled tone, "that you would break all our hearts."

"All. No—only my own! Yours and Peter's need not break."

"There is yet another heart," says Nell. "Have you forgotten—your *son*?"

For the first time in all her life perhaps, Cecilia's gentleness forsakes her. She turns upon Nell with bitter anger.

"You forget yourself!" cries she, with quivering lips. "My son—my son's heart! To break *that*! . . . Go." She points impressively to the door. "Go. *Go!*"

As Nell leaves the room, the little son's mother drops into a chair, and covers her face from the light.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"For this I'm tempest-toss'd,
A drifting skiff at most,
I dare the waves, risk cloud and rain,
I ever tempt my fate again,
Nor care if I be lost.

It is a few days later, and now well into the heart of August. The mornings are a little colder, the evenings yellower, and the asters are holding up their stiff heads in all the borders. In the long avenue the leaves are beginning to fall, not in battalions, but softly, unconsciously, now and then, and one by one—teaching, imperceptibly as it were, the great lesson of life—the sad lesson of Death.

Thursday has come and gone. The Thursday looked forward to by Nell with fears not to be controlled. Cecilia had met her the morning after that strange scene in her room, quite as usual, save for a little increased tenderness in her greeting—poor Cecilia, who hated to be at variance with anyone—who had not enough strength for a quarrel. There had been a touch of remorse in her kiss, that had made Nell catch her and hold her, feeling inclined to cry the while. But Cecilia had said nothing more about Philip's coming. Therefore, as Nell knew, he *was* coming. And Nell wondered hourly if Cecilia feared or cared—or gave a thought to it at all.

Cecilia *had* cared, however, and thought a great deal, and feared, perhaps, even more than Nell—but hers had been a glad terror. It was full of sweetness, of strange, unknown expectation, of the misery that fills the wine-cup of life. Mingled with her fear was a mad joy that would not be kept down, that sent her singing with a sweet passion through the gardens in the late morning, until some vague misgiving rose to kill the song. But underneath these misgivings, these sharp little pangs that caught her heart as if a child's hand grasped it—the music ever lay.

At times she felt unnerved and dispirited, and found a difficulty in being quite herself. There was a burden on her hard to lift, and her shoulders were of the dainty kind that sink easily beneath a load. It was at these times that the fear closed in upon her. She was so seldom *sure* of herself, even in the lighter, more ordinary affairs of her life; how then could she be sure now—now when Fate was rushing on her? But, perhaps, it was this very distrust of herself, this terrible uncertainty as to what she might or might not do on imagined occasions, that gave a keen edge to the indescribable thrill of ecstasy that always shook her when she dwelt on Philip's coming.

If it had all been laid open to her—if she had known how things would go; how she would be able to receive him; how it would be with him; how much control she could depend upon—if all things had been made clear to her; she longed for all this—or thought she did—but in reality it was the doubt that fascinated her—though

she spent her days telling herself that there was no doubt—none—none. Philip would come, and she would take his visit calmly, and she would be happy for a little while. That would be all. That he would go some day, she knew too—somewhere down at the back of her mind, but she refused to drag this thought into the light. She never dwelt upon it. She was strictly Scriptural in some things—she certainly gave no thought to the morrow! To-day was sufficient for her. Her to-days had, up to this, been singularly void of evil.

The Thursday had come, and with it Philip, but for a day only!

Stairs was a persistent man, if not a strong one—and indeed it was impossible not to see that he was positively weak in some ways. He was at all events capable of being crushed beneath a love affair—of being driven by passion as a leaf by the wind, and so far unable to resist the dragging of his heart strings, that they led him whithersoever they listed—a pretty dance at most times—and in his case where honour should have barred the way.

Yet in spite of all this he was a gentleman, and it revolted his small remaining sense of right and wrong—to sleep beneath Peter Gaveston's roof, to hold a fair face to him, and to eat his bread.

When he left Cecilia on that last evening in the orchard, he had been full of his promise to her, and no doubt if he had been a stronger man—or a man with a few less grains of the cravings that honour demand—he would have held to that promise, though all Heaven and earth swore at him; but honour was still a landmark with him, and he was not built of such strong fibre as some.

He had left her full of his determination to do as she would have him do, but once gone from her—when the silent darkness of the wood had caught and enfolded him in its grand tranquillity—when the fascination that might surely be called “glamour” of her presence, fell away from him, he woke with a start from his dream and knew he could not do this thing. He could not accept Peter Gaveston's invitation. He stopped short in the darkness of the wood and thought. He knew at all events that he ought to refuse it.

But how? All the small world of Bigley-on-Sea

knew he was going to Gaveston Hall on the expiration of his visit to the McGregors. It had been discussed everywhere. And to refuse now, to leave so abruptly, would surely lead to comment, comment that must come home to Cecilia. He had thought this out before, and had decided risking the comments, but now again he hesitates.

It was rather unfortunate that the McGregors had discussed so openly the fact of his going *from* them to the Hall. But they *had* done so very openly, and pleasantly, and certainly without an *arrière pensée*. But then other people had discussed it too, *not* openly, and decidedly not so pleasantly.

Stairs was aware of all this, and felt that a problem had been thrown upon his shoulders very difficult of solution. Would it be better for Cecilia if he were to go now—or if he were to accept Gaveston's invitation for a day, and so have it out? What was the best plan for Cecilia—Cecilia was all his thought—which rendering of the difficulty would best wither that poison, that lay beneath the aspidochelone tongues of the Bigley-on-Sea people?

There were more to be considered than the Bigley-on-Seas however. There was Gaveston. Stairs had never overcome that first feeling of respect for Peter that had entered into him when he saw Cecilia's husband. How was he to explain to Gaveston his change of front?

He went slowly through the wood thinking, suffering torture so acute that it seemed to touch his body even as his mind. His body and his mind indeed were fighting a hard and cruel fight. Finally they came to a settlement. He drew himself up, pausing—thinking.

Yes, he will go—on Thursday—and on Friday he will leave by the evening mail, that goes at seven. That is settled. He feels quite strong again. It is settled; nothing shall undo it. On Friday evening at six-thirty he will bid her good-bye. There must be an end of it somewhere, and it shall be then. It will be an easy matter to get a telegram to-morrow telling him of a friend who is going abroad, and who wants him to go with him. Such telegrams, if rare, are not unheard of. He will explain this to the McGregors first; the McGregors who are always so sympathetic, and so talkative.

For a man invalided home as he had been, it would seem the most natural thing in the world. He had been ill. He desired to travel in the south of Europe with a view to picking up the loose threads of vitality that still seemed wickedly anxious to slip through the loom.

The McGregors—kind souls—would at once see the advantage of his spending, for his health's sake, the remaining months of his leave abroad. They would explain to others—the busy tongues would cease.

And he—he would see her again. He did not say “alone.” He refused to admit that hope even to himself, and for once was a hypocrite. He would see her for her own sake, to stop the mouths of the gossips. Once again—and then——

He drew a long breath and looked out to the ocean. He had gained a hill, and all the vast magnificent field of water was laid bare to him. It was quite clear—quite clear—like the future he has planned for himself, and terribly barren!

“There’s not a ship in sight;
And as the sun goes under
Thick clouds conspire to cover
The moon that should rise yonder.
Thou art alone, fond lover.”

Then! Yes! it would be all over then.

He went home and wrote a note to be sent to Gaveston next day—he felt he was outraging all the tenets of society, but he *could* not write to Cecilia—to say that pressing business would prevent his staying longer with him than from Thursday to Friday. And he so far satisfied his conscience as to reduce those days to their shortest span so far as *his* use of them was concerned. He would come to dinner on Thursday, he wrote, and was sorry to say he should have to leave by the seven train on Friday. He was so disappointed about the whole thing, but a friend of his was starting in a week for Norway, and he had promised him some time since to go with him, and——

There were a good many “ands,” all of them very plausible and all of them entirely outside the boundary of truth.

Gaveston received the note and showed it to Cecilia,

who made no sign. She turned slowly aside without a word of comment, but no emotion was visible. Perhaps she did not believe in it, but she acted as if she did, and to Nell's overwhelming surprise, who had read the letter too, she organized a rather large luncheon party for the Friday that was to see his final departure. It seemed as if she too were determined to prevent any last words.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"That's a valiant flea that dares eat his breakfast on the lip of a lion."

THE luncheon has gone off admirably. Cecilia indeed had been the life and soul of it. She had asked Mrs. Chance and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss amongst others, in spite of Nell's protests. To the girl she seemed to *court* their observation—to compel them to see all that there was to be seen, between her and Stairs. This might have arisen out of the petulant desire to prove to them how little there really was—to stifle their gossip in their throats.

But if so, she threw herself away. Gossip is not so easily to be stifled. A little dying ember dropped as all fires drop them, springs to fuller life through the shock, and sets ablaze again the smouldering logs, and so the game goes on.

It was, perhaps, a little unfortunate that Gaveston had told them all at luncheon, that he must run up to town by the three-thirty train, and that he could not be home until the eleven-fifteen. It was decidedly unfortunate that he had to go, but the business was very imperative. He had apologised to Stairs about it early in the morning, when the telegram that summoned him, had arrived. The fact of his not being back to bid him good-bye, seemed so inhospitable. Stairs' train took him away at seven, so that there was really no chance of seeing him again. He was genuinely sorry—and he had not noticed the strange light that came into Stairs' eyes as he made his announcement.

The younger man had murmured something necessary, and had then turned abruptly away. There was a singing in his ears. . . . He would be able then to bid her good-bye alone—alone!

They are all in the drawing room now, moving about, or talking in little groups, whilst putting on their gloves preparatory to departure.

Mrs. Chance has glided up to Peter, her most engaging expression on her face, her little hesitation somewhat accentuated.

"So you are really going up to town this evening?"

"Yes. Can I do anything for you?" asks Gaveston kindly.

"What a noble offer. I wish I could avail myself of it. No, I . . . was only wondering how you could tear yourself away from your wife. I have heard . . . is it true?—that you have never been separated from her since your marriage for an hour."

"I am afraid we all hear a great deal of nonsense at times," says Gaveston laughing. "I am not so devoted a husband as all that comes to, and I have no doubt my wife will be able to endure existence without me for a few hours."

"You really think that?" with the prettiest smile.

"I really do," with the good-natured air of a man who is determined not to be bored. Mrs. Chance always bores Peter, a fact of which she is well aware, and resents immensely.

"You are very modest," says she. "I shouldn't wonder"—with downcast eyes—"if you didn't quite understand her."

"Even if I don't," pleasantly, and looking over her head with a view to escape, "and if your surmise is true, that she will miss me, I should be rather glad to believe it. Absence, you know, is popularly supposed to make the heart grow fonder."

"Now that is conceit," says Mrs. Chance. "Such vanity," playfully, "ought to be taken down a little. It wants a corrective. I shall administer it! Do you know, I once heard your wife call you——"

She pauses, glancing at him quite charmingly—mischievous in her eyes, however.

"She never calls me," says Gaveston. "Watson does that!"

"What a silly joke. Shan't I administer the correction then?"

"By all means, but you will have to be quick, for I must catch my train. She called me——?"

"Ugly," says Mrs. Chance. "Wasn't that a flight on her part—wasn't it absurd? Of course she didn't mean it—how could she? but she did really: Now I"—archly—"felt it my duty to tell you that—to take you down a little bit, as I said."

"I'm afraid you haven't succeeded," says Gaveston, smiling imperturbably. "I am afraid you have defeated your own"—pausing—"admirable purpose. I feel, if possible, more vain than ever—a veritable peacock. The idea that my wife, even when engrossed with her guests, takes the trouble to remember me, fills me with a vanity not to be suppressed. It also delights me to know that the guest to whom she made her little confidence, should remember it so long and take such trouble to repeat it to me."

His smile is as easy as ever, as he bids her good-bye, and goes on to the others, but somehow she knows she has changed Gaveston's feeling from kindly toleration to distinct dislike. This is not a pleasant reflection for one who is living on sufferance. The effect on Mrs. Chance, however, is not to make her moderate her transports in the way of malice, but to increase them.

As for Gaveston—he had taken it all very lightly, very carelessly, but in the carriage on his way to the station, where there is no one near him to divert his thoughts, Bella's ill-meant words come back to him.

"Ugly!" Cecilia had called him ugly, and openly—to a big crowd apparently. . . . Pshaw! what nonsense! Of course the woman's talk was not to be depended on. She was chaffing him, no doubt, in her extremely vulgar fashion! And even if Cecilia *had* said it, it was only said in fun. Cecilia was always poking fun at people.

He put it in many lights, but Mrs. Chance, if she had only known it, had done her work. That word "ugly" went with him up to town and down again.

* * * * *

"Have you heard," said Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, seating herself angularly on a seat next Mrs. McGregor, "that Mr. Gaveston is going by the three-thirty train? In fact, there he is now, saying good-bye. Such a mistake on his part."

"A mistake?" questions Mrs. McGregor, who, dear good woman, never thinks of sin. "To say good-bye? It certainly *does* break up a party. But——"

"Nonsense! It will probably break up his life!"

"Dear Mrs. Cutforth-Boss? Surely you say more than you mean."

The delicate, kindly, common-place face grows distressed.

"Not a single syllable," says Maria sternly. "He must be *mad* to go away like this, leaving no one to keep an eye upon her."

"But, my dear, why should an eye be kept upon her?" says Mrs. McGregor, who is charity itself—the grand charity that thinketh no evil. "I suppose you are speaking of that dear girl Nell, and I should certainly think Mr. Gaveston would be right in leaving her to the care of her sister. Mrs. Gaveston surely is a sufficient chaperone."

"It is Mrs. Gaveston to whom I am alluding," says Maria grimly. "It is she"—severely—"who, in my opinion, requires a chaperone. And now she is left without one. Her husband is going up to town on some ridiculous business, leaving that silly fribble of a wife of his alone with her lover. As if his business was not *here*."

"It seems to me," says Mrs. McGregor quietly, "that you don't quite understand. Philip Stairs is impossible of such conduct as you represent . . . and even if he were, he is going away this evening by the seven o'clock train."

"Is he?" says Maria. She is evidently surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Believe me, my dear friend, there is nothing in this absurd scandal."

"Well, if he goes, I'll agree with you," says Maria grimly. "In the meantime," with a levity very foreign, "*we* must go now." Her gloves are already drawn on, and she begins to button them.

Mrs. Chance, being shunted by Gaveston, has found her way to Nell, who is standing in one of the windows with Grant. Cecilia had mentioned Sir Stephen as a guest for this strange luncheon-party, but Nell had implored her to leave him out. She had not explained to Cecilia her reasons for refusing to have him and Cecilia had not asked. The truth was that Nell wished to be left, as far as possible, with as few distractions as might be on this one day. Grant she could manage, but Sir Stephen was always a little *en evidence*; he was shrewder than Grant, too, she thought, and she feared for Cecilia. Her heart, indeed, was full of Cecilia! Who was there to look after her except she, Nell? Peter was going—Mickey was gone!

Mickey's going had been at once a relief and a regret to Nell. When with her, she felt she had a trusty companion, who would stick to her and hers, through all storms and troubles. The Irishman, if rough and a little boisterous at times, was kind at heart, and would have done all he could for those he loved, when at their worst point. And she was sure that he loved Cecilia and Cecilia's husband. He would help them if here. Yet for all that, relief lay in the fact that he was *not* here. It would have been terrible to her that Mickey should have been present when Philip came—and during Philip's stay. But Mickey had gone back to his home in Cork three days ago, after a parting with Nell that he hoped was pathetic.

"So Mr. McNamara is really gone?" says Mrs. Chance, coming up to Nell and her brother. "Do you know I quite thought he was—a—a fixture!"

Mrs. Wilding, who is close to them, talking to Mr. Nobbs, smiles and moves a little bit away, taking her small companion with her.

"One could almost wish he was," says Nell gently. "He is such a very charming companion."

"Of course you miss him?"

"Very much indeed."

"I can quite understand his being delightful in little ways—but an Irishman—is an Irishman ever to be trusted?"

"A gentleman is always to be trusted."

"Do you think so? Now Mr. McNamara struck me

as being a . . . well—a little troublesome—a little unsure. Always talking, you know—always looking round corners, as it were!” (Poor Mickey! he had seen through *her*, and she knows it!)

“You mistake Mr. McNamara,” says Nell coldly. “He was the last person in the world to look round corners.”

“Oh! as for that, I hardly meant *that*. At least, I did not mean what you mean, naughty girl!” She smiles sweetly, and taps Nell on the arm with the glove she is holding, preparatory to putting it on.

“What do I mean?” asks Nell haughtily.

“Ha! ha! we won’t go into it,” with an arch glance that maddens Nell still further. “What I was going to say was that, Mr. McNamara struck me as being clever . . . a little *too* clever, perhaps.”

“I am afraid you have studied him in vain,” says Nell. “It is an open secret that he missed his exam. for the army, and had to take an agency instead.”

She moves away, shaking her head at Grant—who is boiling with indignation—to prevent his following her.

Mrs. Wilding, from her place a few yards away, sees the girl’s face as she goes.

“I’m afraid ‘Mis’ Chance has been a little more chancy than usual this time,” says she to herself. “She has evidently been resurrecting that story about Captain Stairs and Mrs. Gaveston.” And forthwith goes up to the widow, who is now being severely condemned by her brother.

“You look a little upset,” says Mrs. Wilding lightly.

“Who? I?” smiling with some difficulty. “Miss Prendergast looks upset, if you like, and only because I hinted——”

“No. No! I hate hearing about hints,” says Mrs. Wilding, putting up her perfectly-gloved hand. “And,” naïvely, “that is such a dreadfully old story, isn’t it? No one with a grain of sense believes in it now. Why pick up the ashes of an agony that is quite burnt out? You know he is leaving this evening.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Chance’s smile take a little vicious turn. “I hope he *will go alone!*” says she.

Her brother casts an annihilating glance at her.

CHAPTER XLV.

"I will not let thee go,
Ends all our month-long love in this?
Can it be summed up so,
Quit in a single kiss?
I will not let thee go."

THEY are all gone now. Nell has walked up the avenue with Mr. Nobbs and Grant, the latter giving way to curses, "not loud but deep," directed against the stupid little toady, who, perhaps after all, is not so stupid, as no cause for leaving Nell and Grant alone together is apparent to him. Nell's attentions to himself being decidedly marked! She seems indeed almost to *cling* to Mr. Nobbs, and when Geoffrey, running after her, steps to her side—the side near Nobbs, she draws him over to the other side, slipping her arm round his neck, thus putting Grant even farther from her, but all in the sweetest way, and always giving her best and prettiest smiles to Grant. She is feeling almost happy, sure in the belief that Cecilia is coming on, behind her, with Mrs. Wilding.

But Cecilia had stopped at the last step of the stone staircase leading to the terrace, with Stairs beside her, and had there bidden Mrs. Wilding and her husband "good-bye."

As they turned the corner where the escalonia bush hides the terrace from view, Stairs turns to her quickly.

"Give me half-an-hour before I go. Let me bid you good-bye alone."

Cecilia's eyes fill with tears.

"Ah! you won't go," says she. And with this grief-lorn light within her eyes, she leads the way to the eastern garden, the "Old Garden," as it is called; and indeed a sweet, old-fashioned spot it is, filled with old flowers, and older memories and griefs and joys of many a hundred years. It had belonged to the Gavestons for generations untold; it had been planned and laid out by them.

A little summer-house stands in a far corner. Having reached it—it is Cecilia's favourite resort—she turns to him.

"You don't really mean it, do you?" says she. "Of course," with a little nervous laugh. "I know you *meant* to go. But there is no such great hurry, is there?"

"I shall go," says he with determination. "Do not let us waste our last moments over an argument so vain as that."

"Why should it be vain? Peter will come back to-night, and——"

He makes an impatient movement.

"Can't you see that is why I shall go?"

"Oh, *no!* That is why you can stay." She looks mournfully at him. "I know how horrid people can be; what unpleasant things they can say. But when Peter is here——"

Stairs checks her by a gesture. Does she know what she is saying—the horrible dishonour of it? No, surely she cannot.

And indeed she does not. She is looking at him with open grief, with deepest misery. There is no under-current of meaning in her eyes. He will go, unless she can make him stay, and if he goes she will be wretched—that is all.

"Come, *think*, Cecilia!" says he almost roughly. "God knows the word honour is a poor thing on my tongue, but such as it is it has some small life in it yet. Do you think I can stay beneath the roof of your husband, loving you as I do?" His voice is agitated, the remembrance of Peter, kind and hospitable, has come back to him. "I cannot! It is impossible."

"Oh, why talk of love?" says she eagerly. "We are friends?" She breaks off, and her face changes. "However!" says she, pausing, as if thinking—perhaps it is the first time thought has ever stirred her greatly in all her life. "If it is your honour," she pauses again, and bursts into tears. "Go then! I would not have you afterwards look back, and perhaps hate me."

"I shall never do anything but love you," says he with mournful conviction.

"Honour!" she repeats the word as if it is strange to her, and yet as if it touched some new untried string

within her breast. "Do you know, Phil, I have sometimes thought of telling Peter . . . about it . . . our old love, I mean . . ."

"Don't," says Stairs, interrupting her, almost fiercely. "Would you destroy the only good that remains to you? I am going—he will remain. I shall in an hour drop out of your life for ever, he——"

"In an hour!" She seems to have heard only those words. "You don't mean it *really*, Phil. You won't go so soon. You will wait a day—a day or so—just a few little hours. See now, Phil," with a sad attempt at reasoning calmly, "what a little time it is out of all our lives. And we are only friends—good friends, no more. People"—piteously—"can be friends without other people finding fault with them, can't they now?"

He makes her no answer. What answer is there to give, save one?

"You," she creeps closer to him, "you won't go to-night anyway. You will wait till to-morrow. To-morrow after luncheon there is a train. And——"

"I must—I must go," says he desperately.

"But why?" She looks at him with sad eyes. She would have said more perhaps, but that something in her throat chokes her. He can see that tears are not far off, and even as he looks at her, as if too miserable to withdraw his gaze, two large drops fall down her cheeks, sadly, slowly—most forlornly.

He draws his breath quickly. A devil within him that has made a resting place in his heart for many weeks, now suddenly rises triumphant. He had known it was there, and ever since his first meeting with Cecilia he had fought it valiantly, and kept it at bay. But now its hour has come. Perhaps the perpetual wrestling has weakened Stairs, has laid his armour open, and the devil who never sleeps sees his opportunity . . . The devil who never misses one. At all events the enemy has now risen, and rushing in upon him unawares, has crushed him under, and laid his hoof upon his neck.

Conquered, Stairs' soul lies within the dust.

* * * * *

In a moment he has her in his arms, her pretty head pressed tenderly against his breast.

"Come with me!" says he. It is a low whisper fraught and broken with passion.

For a moment she lies within his arms, as if glad—as if thankful for the rest found there. Then she stirs—sighing—and pushes him from her, not angrily, or with disdain, but (and this he cannot fail to see) reluctantly.

"You will?" whispers he eagerly.

"No—no." There is deep regret in her voice.

"Why not?" impatiently. "Are our lives given us to be made the jests of time? And what is your life here to you? And what is my life anywhere without you? My darling! My own!" He draws her to him, holding her hands only, this time however—he loves her too much not to respect her, and he remembers her late withdrawal from him. "You know how it is with me. It is not a moment's growth, Cecilia. It is the one love of all my life. I have never loved anyone but you. You know that! Does that not count with you?"

She looks at him, listening—trembling. Her eyes are on his. They are troubled, mystified. Distressed by the childish uncertainty of them he draws her to him again. He does not attempt to kiss her; but passing his arm round her, he gently but with decision draws her closer. Soon he tells himself—and a mad exultation uplifts him at the thought—she will be his for ever to hold, to cherish, to expend all his life upon.

"The feverish finger of love"

has laid itself upon his heart.

"My darling, speak to me," says he. "Come, Cissy, you will!" He strains her to him. "Decide—decide," cries he feverishly. "There is so little time!"

"Oh, don't ask me that," gasps she faintly. "Anything else—but to go—to go——" She is trembling violently, and he is still holding her. "There is Peter," says she, almost indistinctly, so low has her voice fallen. "He has trusted me. It would be better"—her voice is now anguished, "to die, than to betray his trust. And, indeed, Phil, I would gladly die now, but death," sadly, "will not come near me."

Stairs, letting her go, turns and walks abruptly up and down.

"If he cared—if he cared, even half as much as I do."

"He *does* care," says she. She pauses with a little troubled air; the trouble of looking into things, has come upon her now for the first time. She seems even startled. Surely Peter cares. "You spoke of honour a little while ago," says she. "Peter's honour must be thought of too. It would touch him through *me*." She pauses again. "He has been very good to me," she bursts out at last as though against her will.

"I can believe it." Stairs' face is very pale as he says this—as he acknowledges the worth of the man who had gained so easily the treasure he had meant to conquer the world to win. "It is only I who have been bad to you!" He looks at her with deep and abiding grief within his eyes. "I have come into your life only to destroy it. And yet I swear to you, my beloved, that I fought against this hour. But it has been too strong for me. Must all our days be wasted? Must there be no sunshine on our paths? Will you hold back for ever—*Cissy*!"

It is a note of passion.

His arms are round her again. They hold her, and she alas! is willing to be held.

"Come with me," whispers he, his lips against her ear. "Come. It will be but a moment's trouble—and after *that*——" His voice now, though still low, rings gloriously. "After that——" He holds her back from him, her sudden surrender has made him madly happy. His face is white, but his eyes are lit with a glad, wild light. "After that we shall be always together—together—always! My darling! My life, have you thought of it? Do you know half of what you are to me, how I idolize—how I adore you?"

"Oh!" murmurs she softly. The half articulate sound seems to come from her heart; she clings to him. Her cheek is lying against his. He has won then! His clasp tightens round her.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"if they will not turn, there is blackness of darkness before them,
 and with lights that lead only to uttermost hell."

ALL, in the morning-room, with little Geoffrey on his knees in one of the windows, building houses out of blocks, is walking, with momentarily increasing restlessness, from the window to her chair, and back again. How will Cecilia come in? How long—how *long* she has been out there—in the garden.

Impatiently, and in a half-frightened way, she presses her hands together, staring through the window into the gathering dusk outside. It is now six o'clock, and Philip's train goes at seven. She is aware that she has repeated this, half-a-dozen times during the last hour, the repetition of it being due to the fact that she is living with thankfulness on the thought that soon he will be outside Cecilia's life—at all events for awhile, with any luck, for ever. But why doesn't Cecilia come in? Surely she has not been mad enough to try to persuade him to prolong his stay. And yet—it *is* like Cecilia!

She takes another rapid walk to the window that overlooks the garden path!

What *can* be keeping her? There is but little time left if he really means to catch his train, as the drive to the station will take at least fifteen minutes, and there is always little last things to be done and said; the packing down of the portmanteaus, the good-byes, the review of memories of the most important matters of all, the last, and nearly forgotten—the book for the library, left on the toilet table so as to make quite sure it is being remembered.

And the train goes at seven—and Philip with it, thank goodness! Why doesn't he come in? Every moment is living precious. Her eyes are staring again along the garden path, but no moving thing meets her view. Shall she send a servant to warn him of the passing hour?

That seems so cold, so unfriendly. And his journey will be a very lonely one, poor fellow——

Suddenly, from nowhere, as it were, a frightful fear springs to life within her breast. A hot burning colour dyes her cheeks, then fades away, leaving her ghastly. A sensation of faintness renders her cold, lifeless. Was it that word "lonely" that suggests the terrible thing?

That cruel rush of cold to her heart has gone now, and once again she stares eagerly into the calm of the gathering night. Where—where is Cecilia? Dear Heaven! why isn't Peter at home? Is there *no* one to help her? No one!

The fear grows stronger—surer. Her thoughts are hardly to be endured. Clutching a fold of the amber curtain as if to steady herself, she combats them with all her might, but still they grow—looming large through the soft mist of the coming night outside. She becomes conscious presently that she is trembling in every limb. The train—Philip will go by it, but not alone. . . . *Cecilia will go too!*

It seems quite an old, old thought now, in the dull certainty of it. She turns to the door mechanically, telling herself she must go to her, but pauses suddenly near the round oak table. Even if she did go, of what use would she be?—with no authority behind her, with Peter so many miles away. If a woman could give up husband and position and reputation so easily, how much more easily a sister!

Still to go! She ought—she must. The ordeal seems more than the poor child can bring herself to endure, but there is a good deal of strength underlying the frivolity of her nature that, perhaps, only wants occasion to bring it to the front. She *will* go to her, and hold her back, with all the strength of her young, strong arms, if it comes to that. And she could so hold her; Cecilia, so slender, so delicate, would be no match for her. She takes another step towards the door, and then again she stops. Is Cecilia there to hold? Is she already gone?

She leans against the table; her hand, pressing upon it, keeps her steady. Again that dreadful faintness sweeps over her, and through it comes the sound of the boy's playing with the cards in the distant corner.

There is a little dull "*fl*," that tells of the cards' collapse. Once again the Chinese pagoda has been laid low!

Geoffrey gives way to a groan of disgust—*four* stories high, and now a ruin! Never mind, ruins can be rebuilt with energetic little hands, and the indomitable courage of youth. He gathers together the cards again, and begins a fresh castle.

Nell, roused by the sound of the boy's play, has turned her frightened eyes upon him. Why, here—here is the finest help of all—if only help has not arrived too late. The blood springs into her cheek, and courage once more fills her bosom. The child! Her *child*.

"Geoffrey," calls she eagerly.

"Yes," returns the boy slowly, absently. Already the fresh pagoda is a story high, and the interest in it is absorbing.

"Come here, darling. Come quickly. Oh, *come*, Geoffrey."

"In a minute," says Geoffrey, kindly and courteously, but how could one expect one to "come quickly" when one is building houses out of cards? And already his erection has gained a second story. He is building rapidly, and with success—the second story stands firm and strong.

"Don't mind that, Geoff! Come here," says Nell, so fiercely, and with such a stamp of her little foot that the boy, astonished, looks up at her, a card in his hand (the first brick for the third story), and surprise in his sunny eyes.

"Geoffrey," says Nell, dropping on her knees beside him, "will you do something for me?"

The child looks at her, still clutching the card, however.

"I will," says he at last, after considerable hesitation, and two backward glances at the rising palace behind him.

"Oh, I knew you would," says his auntie, catching him in her arms and smothering him with kisses, a process against which he most actively rebels. "You will run down to the garden, won't you? Now this minute. To your mother—to the little summer house—the little summer house she loves so much, and tell her—tell her——"

Here a sudden storm of grief overcomes her, choking her voice, and making her eyes blind with tears. Oh! to have to ask the boy to save his mother—and yet, what surer messenger? Whose charm so strong as his? It is a last, her only resource as it seems to Nell, whose strange, unaccountable fear is killing her.

"To go to Mammy?" questions the child vaguely.

"Yes. Yes, my darling." Nell is sobbing uncontrollably now, though silently—holding the boy to her to conceal from him her grief. "Go there, and look for Mammy, and if she is not there, go to the upper garden, that overlooks the sea—she loves that place too, and tell her——"

"What'll I tell her?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing!" Nell has risen to her feet, she has choked back her tears, and is standing pale and shaken before the child: "Just run to her, with your arms out like this"—holding out her arms eagerly—"and fling them round her neck like *this*," catching the boy to her, and holding him against her heart.

"Yes—but——" The child, not understanding, hesitates, casting fond glances backwards at his growing palace. How firm it stands. It will not fall *this* time!

"Never mind your house. I'll take care of it till you come back," says Nell feverishly. Alas! in what a house of cards his mother now is dwelling! "Go now, Geoff, darling—go—and *hurry*!"

"But why?" asks the child reluctantly, who naturally cannot see why he is required to go and hug his mother, on this particular occasion; she can always be hugged as often as ever she likes—and to go now, when his house is in danger. He casts another longing glance back at it—the two stories still stand grandly firm.

"Because I ask you. Isn't Nellie—" with a wheedling voice that is stricken with misery, "your own old auntie? Won't you do something for her? You *will* go to your Mammy, won't you, ducky? Oh, you will, Geoffrey"—passionately. "And you will throw your arms round her and kiss her—and kiss her"—in spite of her, her tears break out again here—"your *own* Mammy, Geoffrey. Your own Mammy, remember. She wants you, darling, she does indeed."

"Did she send for me?" asks the boy.

"Yes." Nell tells her lie without a qualm.

"But she'll be coming in now, won't she? And I"—with considerable pride, "want to show her my house when it's done. It'll be a big one this time, there'll be *four* of them if nobody shakes it."

It seems hopeless! Even her own child won't help her. Nell almost thrusts him from her, and then another chance occurs to her. She makes a last move.

"It is time for you to go to bed," says she coldly. "You surely will not go without bidding your Mammy good-night."

"It isn't time yet," says the child, startled.

"Yes—it is."

"But Mammy——"

"She is out in the garden. Go and bid her good-night—and go quickly." The child rises and moves towards the window that opens on to the verandah.

"She'll let me finish it," says he.

"Yes," says Nell eagerly. She almost pushes the child onwards. "And remember what I told you. Your Mammy is not happy. Geoff—*make* her happy! Throw your arms around her, and kiss her, and hold her, and *keep* her! Oh! Geoffrey!"

Nell's voice dies away; the boy has fled down the steps and into the gathering darkness, and now she is at peace to cry her eyes out. If the child should fail. . . . If she should be already gone. . . .

Oh, the relief of being alone! She sinks into a chair—covering her face with her hands—and sobs as if her heart would break, for a minute or two. Then she pulls herself together with the strength—the perpetual springing of hope that belongs to youth only. It is what we moderns call a revulsion of feeling. Why, how foolish she has been. Of course it was impossible; she must have been mad to think such thoughts of Cissy. Why, if she knew, she would never forgive her. . . . But she should never know. Poor Cissy—dear Cissy! . . . Was there ever a wrong thought in her mind? Oh, she trusted her—completely—perfectly!

But the child! How *long* he is! Will he never come back—will she *never* know!

CHAPTER XLVII.

"O thou bright thing, fresh from the hand of God!"

* * * * *

"Look how he laughs and stretches out his arms,
And opens wide his blue eyes upon thine."

It is the eleventh hour indeed! Cecilia with her lover's arms around her has yielded. Yes—she will go with him. She has only to throw on her hat, her coat—a short walk through the woods will bring her to the station in ten minutes. She—

"Mammy! Mammy! Where are you?"

The high, sweet cry of a child—the patter of little sturdy feet upon the gravelled path—the sight of a little handsome boy racing with all his might—capless, and with his bonnie tight-cropped head thrown back.

Cecilia almost *thrusts* Stairs from her. An awful look comes into her eyes.

"My God! I had forgotten *him*!" says she.

She shrinks backwards, almost cowering before the child who, now having seen her, casts himself with a little merry cry into her arms. The arms that for the first time in all his adored little life, feel slack, loveless. It is not the want of love that makes them weak—fear and shame, and passionate self-reproach render Cecilia cold.

"Nellie told me I'd find you here," says the boy gaily. "You're to come in, she says, and I was to kiss you like this, and like this." He has pulled down his young mother's head to his, with his fond, stout, little arms, and is kissing her, with a laugh between every kiss. "You must come in at once, because it's nearly time for me to go to bed, and I want to finish my house first."

"I'll come—in a minute, Geoffrey," says his mother in a choking voice.

"No, now—now!" with childish persistency, "I want to say my prayers to you."

Another stab.

"Last time I didn't say my prayers to you I was very ill after it. 'Member?"

It was a year ago, and something had prevented her hearing the child say his simple prayers. "Our Father" first, and then "God bless Pappy and Mammy"; and it so happened that next day he developed a cold and was confined to his bed for some days. With a child's queer reasoning he had always said that the reason he was ill was because he had not said his prayers at his mother's knee.

Ill! If he should be really ill, when she was miles and miles away from him. . . . separated from him by still greater barriers than time or distance—barriers of her own erection. Ill! The word rings in her ears. Dying perhaps! Perhaps *dead*—and buried, and she not even knowing.

With a frantic fervour she clasps him to her breast—holding him convulsively to her; slowly she turns her eyes on Stairs.

"Go!" says she, framing the word with difficulty.

"You have decided?" His voice is cold and strange. He had known, from the moment of the boy's coming, how it could be. The terrible look in her eyes was not to be mistaken. The child had dashed aside his chance for ever. He had come five minutes too soon. She *had* given up her husband—she would *not* give up the child.

"You must see," whispers she in a voice of anguish, pressing the little one's head against her bosom, as though to prevent his hearing.

"Perfectly! You had to choose between—him—and me, and you have chosen the child. *His* child!"

"No—mine—*mine*! My own——" She pauses as if spent. "He is my soul! Shall I destroy him? When he grew up—to hear of me—to think with scorn of me . . . how would it be then? *Now* he loves me! . . . *Then*! . . ."

"It is all over then," says he brusquely.

"I cannot!"

"It is the last word, Cecilia?"

"Yes," in a dying tone.

The child, struggling in her embrace, has now freed himself, and is looking anxiously from his mother to Stairs.

"You are crying," says he, peering at his mother in the now uncertain light—then turning upon Stairs, whom, with all a child's curious instinct, he had never liked, he breaks out, "I hate you! It is you—it is *you* who are making her cry."

"Oh! Geoffrey, no; not a word, my darling!"

Again she presses his head against her, as though to hide from him her face, and looks with anguished eyes upon her lover. Dumbly she holds out to him her hand. He takes it mechanically, then drops it and turns to go.

At this, a low but bitter cry escapes her.

"Phil, Phil!" She sways a little towards him, holding out to him again, the hand he has so coolly dropped, whilst keeping the other still clasped around the boy. "A moment—you will not go—like this—you"—gasping—"will bid me good-bye?"

For a while they so stand staring into each other's eyes—she so white in her misery—he with a face full of the bitterness of death. Then he steps deliberately out of the summer-house, and disappears into the night mist beyond.

* * * * *

Silence has fallen on the garden.

The rejected hand has slowly joined the other, and is now clasped around the child's neck. Cecilia has sunk into a chair, and Geoffrey, uncertain, but a little frightened, has crept into her lap.

Outside, a sudden, gentle rising of the wind, has shaken a leaf or two from the rose-bush near, and far away beyond the hills over there, a young bright moon is standing, within a dazzling field of purple, shading to darkest grey.

"Mammy," says the child nervously, "why don't you come in? Are you crying again?"

"No, no."

"Your hands are very cold! I want to go in. I——" whimpering, "I'm cold, too. I'm tired. I'm sleepy!"

"Wait a while—a little while, my darling, with your Mammy—your poor Mammy."

He must be going now. In another minute or so he will be gone. Her heart is dying within her—her knees feel weak; the effort to rise, to stir is beyond her. Now—what was that? The sound of carriage wheels? Now

he is gone! gone—for ever! She has sent him from her——

“Phil——”

She starts to her feet with a stifled cry, still holding the child, but gazing before her, listening always to the departing wheels, her eyes straining into the night.

“What is it, Mammy?” whispers the child, his voice beginning to quiver. Presently he bursts out crying.

“Don’t, don’t! My darling, my delight. Don’t cry. It is nothing—nothing at all, my sweetheart. There, come, we will go in! And he will love his poor Mammy always, and he will always remember that she loved him beyond all, beyond everything—beyond life itself!”

CHAPTER XLVIII.

“Even ev’ry ray of hope destroyed,
And not a *wish* to gild the gloom.”

CECILIA has pushed back the curtains that hide the window leading on to the verandah, and has stumbled into the room before Nell sees her.

“Oh! Thank God!” cries the girl fervently, forgetting herself in the strain of the moment. How is she to explain her thankfulness further on? “Oh! Cissy. You have come. . . . You——”

She stops short abruptly. Cecilia’s face is ghastly! Is it Cecilia at all? *This* woman is ten years older than the Cecilia of the afternoon. The change in her terrifies Nell. She runs to her and would have caught her, but Cecilia thrusts her back—even in this supreme moment, the action is singularly graceful.

“Let me alone!” says she. Her soft, sweet voice is hardly recognisable. She has moved forward, but now she looks back at Nell. “He is *gone*!”

The words break from her in a little burst, as though it were impossible to keep them back. Nell, who is like a sheet of paper herself, sends up silently a fervent thanksgiving to Heaven.

"Gone?"

"Yes—for ever," says Cecilia stupidly as if dazed. Then all at once her manner changes. Life comes into her face again. "Oh, no; he can't be gone yet," cries she. She hurries towards the window, and drags the curtains aside in a frenzied fashion. "There may yet be time . . ."

She has forgotten the sound of those wheels now lost and gone.

"Are you *mad!*" says Nell sternly, going quickly forward, and getting between her and the window; "you *shall* not go! You shall stay here! Cecilia, are you lost to all sense of honour? He is gone—gone, Cissy! And I thank God for his going!"

"Oh, Nell! Oh, Nell!" says Cecilia. Her voice eats into Nell's heart. She does not resist in any way. Indeed, she lets Nell lead her back and press her into a chair, where she lies as if exhausted. She has clasped her hands over her eyes.

"How shall I bear it? How?" A convulsive shudder shakes her slender body. Suddenly she springs up. "I can't bear it! I won't! Nell, have pity! You are the only one who can help me! Help me, now! I *must* see him again—some way—and soon—soon. If I wrote to him . . ."

She breaks into wild weeping.

"Hush!" says Nell, almost violently. "Do you want the servants to hear?"

She catches Cecilia, and folding her arms about her, presses her to her so that her sobs may not be heard. She herself, poor child, is shaking all over, yet still a great courage is with her . . . And God be thanked, Peter is away.

"Come upstairs," says she in a low tone, but with authority.

At any moment a servant may come in, and servants, given one glance, know *everything*. Servants are the cleverest class in the world.

She slips her hand through Cecilia's arm, and Cecilia, when her sobs have grown fewer, allows her to guide her from the room and upstairs, a little journey accomplished by Nell in fear and trembling. But providentially all the women-servants are downstairs at this time,

and she gets Cecilia into her room without encountering anyone.

"We shall be quiet here. You told Marshall you would not dress to-night, did you not? Lie back there, and rest, and do not talk."

"I must talk to you," says Cecilia. "I must tell you, Nell—you will listen? Oh, the comfort of *saying* it all."

"Don't say too much," says Nell a trifle grimly. "There is always to-morrow!"

"To-morrow!" Cecilia looks at her, as if only half understanding; then the misery in her eyes grows if possible deeper. "Oh! dear Heaven! it is true," cries she. "To-morrow—and the to-morrow after that—and days and years—*years*, Nell! How am I to live them out? Oh! why did I let him go? He wanted me to go with him, and I refused—*refused*."

"Don't talk like that," says the girl. "Don't!—I tell you, you will be sorry; you have a husband and——"

"I know it"—passionately. "Does one forget one's chief misfortune? I have a husband who was forced upon me when I was a mere child—when I did not know what I was doing; when I was a girl younger than you are now. I knew nothing then, but I know *now* what I did, I threw away my life, my soul, my happiness! What is Peter to me? I tell you"—she rises suddenly and flings out her arms with a tragic gesture—"I would gladly see him *dead* rather than that Philip should endure one pang."

"You don't know what you are saying," says Nell. She is terribly agitated. "To speak of Peter like that. Peter, who loves you, who trusts you!" Cecilia makes a terrible movement. "Oh, darling, darling, think." All at once her grief overpowers her, and she gives way. Sinking at Cecilia's feet, she clasps her arms round her. "I know—I *know* that you are suffering, but think of Peter, Cissy, think of the man who——"

"I can't," says Cecilia stonily. She makes a faint effort to push the girl from her, but Nell still clings to her, crying bitterly but noiselessly, her face hidden against her sister's skirts. "I can think of nothing but my lost youth—my lost happiness—my dead life. All is over. All. I tell you, Nell, I have not one thought left for Peter. I was sold to him——"

"But he did not know."

"Nevertheless he must take the consequences. He"—with a cruel judging, that seems to transform her—"should have known."

"Still—he didn't," pleads Nell. "And he has loved you—been good to you. He is your husband. Cecilia, you *must* remember you have a husband and a——"

"No. No." Cecilia breaks from her embrace, and Nell rises slowly to her feet. The face of the child is before them both. "I forbid you to speak of *him*."

There is a long silence, from which Cecilia is the first to recover. Her manner is a little changed now, calmer, colder.

"I know all that you would say. I am a married woman—the rights of marriage are sacred. I do not respect them, and I do not love the man to whom the law has bound me. I am therefore"—with a contemptuous laugh—"a wicked woman!"

"No. No, darling."

"You are right." She throws back her lovely head with a defiant gesture. "People call me so, but I don't *feel* wicked. It is the world that has been wicked to me. Why should I be deprived of love and joy—you talk to me—you who have your life before you—you who can choose this man or that for your husband—you who have no mother to coerce you—to *lie* to you—to——" She breaks off suddenly, and begins to pace, with quick, uneven steps, up and down the room.

"It was hard," says Nell, in a low tone, broken, sweet, sympathetic. It touches the wounded heart. Cecilia, stopping short, looks at her.

"Hard! That is the word. You feel for me then? You understand—you do not condemn!"

"Oh! Cissy! You *know* I don't."

* * * * *

"Dinner will be ready in half an hour," says Nell presently—a fresh anxiety springing to life. "You must bathe your eyes."

"I can't go downstairs," says Cecilia. "Nellie—arrange it."

"We can have a tray sent up here then."

Sometimes when Peter has gone on magisterial business to one of the county towns, the sisters had pre-

ferred a little unceremonious meal sent up to them to Cecilia's dainty boudoir, to the more prolonged dinner downstairs in the dining-room.

"It will be all right—I'll speak to James presently. Now *do* try and take a little rest."

"Yes—yes." She leans back, sighing, heavily, but almost immediately looks up again. "Did he—did he say good-bye to you?"

"No," stoutly. "I suppose he had *some* sense of decency left. He must have understood why I sent——"

She stops. She had not meant to betray her part in the affair, but it is too late now to retract.

"You sent Geoffrey to the garden?"

"Yes," says Nell, disdaining to compromise. "I sent him, and whatever *you* may think of it—I shall always regard it as the best action of my life. You ought to be very grateful to me."

"Ought I?" says poor Cecilia. She turns away, and the tears run down her cheeks afresh. "I suppose so. But"—plaintively—"I'm not."

"Look here," says Nell presently, when she has bathed her forehead with eau de Cologne, and restored her to calm again. "Peter will be back at half-past eleven at latest, and you will have to see *him*."

"I will not," says Cecilia, with sudden, strange determination.

"But——"

"I *will* not? Tell him I have a headache. Tell him anything you like. I shall certainly not see him."

"But is that wise, Cissy? Surely he will think—connect——"

"I don't care what he thinks," says Cecilia doggedly, and, indeed, this proves final. Nell, after five minutes' further argument, finds it impossible to move her.

Dinner comes, and the sorry pretence at eating it, being at an end, Cecilia decides on going to bed.

"I'm tired. I'm worn out, Nellie."

"I know. I'll put you to bed. *Poor* old ducky!"

Tenderly—with the most loving care Nell undresses her, and brushes her hair, and finally tucks her into her bed.

"Good-night now, darling, and try to sleep."

"I will—I will, indeed," says Cecilia obediently, who

feels as though she will never go to sleep again. And Nell turning away, she puts out a hand and catches her. To be left alone. . . .

"Nell—a moment. . . ."

"Yes, darling. Would you like me to stay with you?"

"Oh! I *should*. But—you are tired."

"I am not, indeed."

"Yes, you are! I know you are, But, Nellie"—she draws up the sheet over her face, as if to hide it, in a childish way—"he said something to me about—about *honour*!"

"Oh, *his* honour!" says Nell contemptuously, but so low that Cecilia does not hear.

"Yes! Honour! Well, I have saved his honour, Nell. But—I *have* broken my own heart!"

"Cissy!"

Nell tries to pull down the sheet, and look at her, but she resists strongly.

"Oh, Cissy darling, what can I do for you?"

"What can anyone do for me?"

There is a pause, and presently, in a stifled voice, she says:

"Bring Geoff to me."

Nell, running into the nursery, lifts the boy—so rosy and so sweet in his happy dreaming, and gives him, only half awake, into his mother's arms.

"Mammy," says he drowsily, but so happily. It is one of his many treats to sleep with his "Mammy." Nell sees Cecilia's arms close round him, sees her eager kiss upon his pretty cheek, sees the almost convulsive clutching to her of the loved little form—and, lowering the lamp, she steps lightly from the room. If anything can cure this cruel wound, surely the child's arms will!

* * * * *

Half-past eleven has struck, and Nell, stepping out into the corridor, meets Gaveston as he comes up the stairs. She lays her finger on her lips. Cecilia has had one of her headaches, she explains to him. She, Nell, had taken Geoffrey to sleep with her. Both are asleep now. He must be careful not to disturb them.

Of course he will be careful. On tiptoe he creeps to

his wife's room, and having laid the candlestick on the floor, leans over her and his child.

Such a lovely pair! The faces so alike—and one scarcely younger than the other. The child's arms are flung wide, in all the happy abandonment of childhood, but the mother's arms are fondly clasped around the little shapely body.

But how pale Cecilia looks. What circles lie beneath her eyes. Her headache has been bad, poor darling! Nell had not made enough of it! But no doubt this sound sleep will chase it all away.

Noiselessly he withdraws from the room, and as the door closes behind him, Cecilia stirs. Softly bringing one of the sleeping child's hands to her lips, she presses kiss upon kiss on it—then breaks into bitter tears.

CHAPTER XLIX.

“When a man is old,
And the weather blowes cold,
Well fare a fire and a furred gowne;
But when he is young,
And his blood new sprung,
His sweetheart is wirth halfe the towne!”

It is a month later, and Nell, filled with joy at the beauty of this sweet September day, has decided on going for one of her long, lonely rides across the downs. No groom for her on these wild, happy excursions, only her pretty bay mare—“Miss Jenkins,” to keep her company.

Down through the woodland path, where the beech-leaves are making a copper carpet for her horse's feet, and out into the open ground beyond—up the big hill, and so on to the high level sweep of country, from which one can see the ocean for miles and miles. The smell of the sea-weed is in the air to-day, and the heavy gorgeous purple of the heather is decorating the whole wide world—so far as she can see. There is a splendid majesty about the sombre glory of this autumn day.

"September, all glorious with gold as a king,
In radiance attired,
Outlightening the summer, outsweetening the spring,
Broods wide on the woodlands with limitless wing,
A presence of all men desired."

Oh! how sweet it is up here with the salt spray casting its fragrance towards her and the sun glistening and playing with the waves, that seem so many *years* away down there. She pulls rein, and letting Miss Jenkins fret a little, gazes thoughtfully at the sea. That great thing! How free it is, tossing this way and that at its own free will—so calm, so solemn, so entirely without care! If you had told her at this moment that there were such rude tyrants as tides to hold this seemingly-free ocean in check, and that there was even a moon to check the tides, it might perhaps have taken something from her admiration of the ocean's freedom, and certainly you would have displeased her. Presently Miss Jenkins, having protested over-much at the enforced delay, Nell continues her way across the downs, the mare breaking unforbidden into a light canter. It seems to set itself to music, and presently Nell finds herself singing:

"Oh! who will o'er the downs with me?
Oh! who will with me ride?
Oh! who will up and follow me,
To win a blooming bride?"

Suddenly she bursts out laughing. Perhaps it is the ozone that has got into her head, but certainly she has not felt so joyous for weeks as she does to-day. What a ridiculous glee! Were they all . . . *all* the followers to win "the blooming bride"? And "blooming"—how the word has lost its first fresh meaning? It sounds now like a costermonger's ditty addressed to his young woman. But costermongers, as a rule, don't run away with their young ladies on horseback—they content themselves with a wedding trip on "A Bicycle made for Two," if one can depend on those who attempt to explain their manners and little eccentricities.

Miss Jenkins has now taken a small fence that stood in her way—a way that leads into the woods of "Strange," and the thread of Nell's thoughts is broken.

"My father, he has locked the door,
My mother keeps the key.
But neither locks nor bars can keep
My own true love from me!"

What a terribly determined person! Thank goodness people are not so determined now-a-days. But even if they; well—there's one thing, she will not be anyone's "blooming bride" for many a year yet—if at all. No! marriage is a mistake. Poor Cissy's failure is always before her. An ever freshly recurring grief.

She is in the "Strange" wood now, and even as her thoughts take this heroic turn, she finds herself looking at Grant, who is riding towards her through the trees, evidently in mad haste.

Now, part of her desire to enjoy this exquisite day alone, had arisen out of a determination to avoid "the coming man." She had seen him yesterday, and he had expressed a determination to come over and see Cecilia to-day. One could easily know what *that* meant. Cecilia would give him tea, an hour after he arrived, and Cecilia would disappear for another hour after that; and this troublesome Captain Grant had been pressing his suit with her—Nell—somewhat vigorously during the past fortnight.

How idiotically Time (old as he is, he might surely know *something*!) arranges matters. Why on earth should Alec be here, of all places, at this hour? The sun and the earth refuse to answer this leading question, and there he is certainly, at all events!

"How d'ye do?" says she ever so pleasantly, and trying to keep a guilty look out of her eyes. It is impossible to put out of sight the fact that he had told her that he would be at the Park at five, and here is she, at half-past four, riding leisurely in the opposite direction. He had told her too, that he would have to spend his morning at the McGregors', who were getting up private theatricals, so that he could hardly lay the flattering unction to his soul, that she had come this way to meet him, as the McGregors live in exactly the opposite direction.

"Quite well, thank you," returns he ironically, dropping to the ground, and going up to her, his horse's bridle over his arm. "I needn't ask how you are—this

long ride from your home assures me of your health. Are you coming back to tea?"

"Did you expect me to be there? You told me you were going to see Cecilia."

"Nell! Is that honest?"

"I don't see why I am to be accused of dishonesty," says the girl, flushing in spite of herself, and playing somewhat nervously with her reins.

"Don't you? You knew very well," says the young man, breaking into open wrath, "that I was going over to The Park to-day to see you. Will you deny that?"

"Have I denied anything? Even," her own anger rising now, "if I did know you were going, why should I be accused of—of very unpleasant things, because I choose to go for a ride instead of staying in for afternoon-tea? Supposing I had a headache and wished to ride it off? . . ."

"Had you a headache?" His manner has now all the determination of one who means to elicit an answer, whether she wishes to give it or not. It is a sort of bringing her to bay that annoys Nell.

"No; I had not," says she slowly, and with distinct defiance.

"That is not to be misunderstood at all events," says he coldly. He turns away, but even with his foot in the stirrup—he hesitates, and as a consequence is lost.

In a moment he is at her side again.

"Nell—it is useless. I can't go—not while there is the smallest chance of getting you. And as long as you don't love any other fellow, there may be that."

He pauses, as if waiting for a denial from her as to the other possible chance. The denial does not come.

"You don't?"

"No—no. Of course not," hastily. "I"—impatiently—"am quite *tired* of telling you that."

"I am not tired of hearing it."

Miss Prendergast makes a little angry movement, and turning in her saddle looks through the trees to where a glimpse of the ocean can still be seen. The horses have lowered their heads, and are nibbling with a rather dignified air, the long unsavoury grass that grows beneath trees.

"Don't turn from me like that, Nell. Is it because I tell you that you are the only woman in the world I want to marry, that you should treat me with disdain?"

"I don't treat you with disdain. I treat you just as I do anyone else. But—why can't you see it? I don't want to be married *at all*!" She has not turned her head towards him, she is still gazing out at the glimpse of the ocean, that shows between the trees, so free, so calm. She too wants to be free. . . . To go her own way, to have no control over her, no one to ask why she travels this path, or that. Cecilia's marriage is ever before her. What a terrible mistake that had been—and is any marriage very happy?

"You know you don't mean that," says he.

"I do. I want to be an old maid."

"Nonsense."

Perhaps looking at her, there is some justification for this rude remark.

"I want to be free anyway," says she slowly.

"But in a year or two. Perhaps then you would listen to me. Perhaps then you would tire of freedom."

"Never. Never."

"How can you tell? A year makes a great difference. Give me *some* hope, Nell."

"What can I say to convince you?" cries she in despair. "Surely this is hard on me. What hope is there to give?"

"It is true, however, what you said just now—that there is no hope for any other man."

"How persistent you are," faintly smiling. "No! there is no hope for any other man or," laughing, "you either. Not——" She holds out her hand to him kindly, and in the thankful spirit of one who has found a way of escape out of her trouble, "not a *scrap*."

"I may believe you?" taking the hand and holding it as though it were a relic.

"You may," eagerly, "you may indeed." She is bending slightly from her saddle, and Grant is looking up at her with undeniable devotion in his gaze. It is perhaps a little unfortunate that Wortley should have chosen this moment of all others—gun in hand—to step on to the top of a wall that leads into a field some distance

away. From there he has a clear view of the two below—of Nell bending towards Grant—of Grant holding her hand. Of the two faces, so close together—so earnest!

CHAPTER L.

"The whimpering winds have lost their way;
Weep, yaffel, weep from tree to tree;
The trunks stand grim and the fields stretch gray,
And, the year that is dead, is dead for aye;
Weep, yaffel, weep from tree to tree."

WITH a sharp ejaculation he drops from the wall back into the field from which he has just come. To look further is impossible, though he would have given half he is worth to see; but it is with a sense of passionate disgust that he leans against the wall, and lets his mind dwell on the picture he has just seen. What a *contemptible* flirt! And without a particle of principle! She had lied to him freely about Grant—he has seen enough with his own eyes now, to convince him for ever of that, and no doubt she had not been quite truthful about her relations with Stairs.

There had been some foolish gossip in the neighbourhood about Stairs and her sister, Mrs. Gaveston, but people, as some wise person has discovered, are "mostly fools," and Miss Prendergast had undoubtedly befooled them to the top of her bent. It seems even possible that this accomplished coquette had used her own sister as a blind to hide her flirtations.

At all events she has befooled him twice. He had believed her when she told him Grant was nothing to her—twice he had believed that, and now with this evidence——

There is an old proverb, that "the third is the charm." Her third time has come, and the charm is—with him now, he has seen—he knows.

The soft trample of horses' hoofs across the field behind him sharpens his thoughts. In another moment Miss Prendergast's mare has cleared a small break in the wall, and is advancing towards him.

"You, Sir Stephen? You have been killing some poor pretty thing of course?"

She makes a gesture towards the gun on his shoulder, and her manner is meant to be, as usual, as indifferent as possible. But it is clear all the same that his appearance has disturbed her in an extraordinary degree. To him, it occurs that she is afraid of his having seen her just now with Grant. To her——

"No. I have been very unfortunate so far. If I had said that to you it might have had more meaning."

"You think *I* have been killing something then? But Miss Jenkins, as you see, is quite fresh."

"She has had a long rest." To hide from her the fact that he had seen her with Grant is distasteful to his sharp sense of honour. "I saw you talking to Grant just now," he says bluntly.

"You saw?"

"Certainly I did. I couldn't help it. You might have seen me too, for the matter of that. I stood on the wall here. The world is free to everyone, you know, and I couldn't possibly have known that you were keeping a tryst with some one at the other side of it." He points to the wall.

"A tryst. Still—you say you saw—and then——?"

"And then I jumped down. I felt I shouldn't have seen—even so much."

"Did you? What a delicate conscience! And what was there to be seen?"

"Need I tell you?" His tone is quite as sarcastic as hers. "A very charming picture, I assure you, and highly romantic. A girl on horseback, a man, very literally at her knees. Evidently the chosen lover, as the girl's hand was tenderly clasped in his. I am sorry," says Wortley, breaking off suddenly, "that I cannot add a few more touches to the pretty scene, but as I have already told you, at that interesting stage of the proceedings, I found I ought not to be there at all, so I jumped off the wall."

"You are very clever," says Nell, her face extremely pale. "You are also," slowly, "very impertinent!"

"You wrong me there, I think," says Wortley, still with his mocking smile. "You must remember that you insisted on my telling you what I saw. Was the

description not graphic enough, or too highly coloured? Where am I in fault? For my own part I see but one error in my conduct. As your guardian I should perhaps *not* have dropped off that wall—I should have kept my eye on you. But as you see, I fell short there."

"As I have just hinted, you are wonderfully conscientious."

"Am I? In a little time, to which I am sure you look forward with hope, you will be released from my conscientious care. In the meantime, it is my bounden duty to look after you—to tell you what I think of you."

"Of me?"

"Of you."

"Then tell me!" Nell is looking at him with an air that would have daunted most men, with the contemptuous open air of a young girl who thinks she knows all things, and who in effect knows so very little. Her manner is very defiant, and it is quite plain to him that she is extremely angry.

"Shall I?"

"I hope you quite understand that you *must*," says the girl with a certain hauteur.

"Your blood be on your own head," says Wortley, regarding her with exasperating calmness, "though perhaps, what I am going to say, will raise you a peg or two in your own estimation. As a fact I think you are the greatest coquette it has ever been my great good fortune to meet! There! That's praise, isn't it? It is always a matter for rejoicing to be the biggest person in one's own line."

"And on what have you founded this remarkable theory of yours?" Miss Prendergast's voice sounds stifled.

"You insist on going further then." He shrugs his shoulders. "Why, there is first one lover, and then another."

He stops, and she colours hotly. Who does he mean by the other? Surely not . . . *He*—Sir Stephen—has never . . .

"I don't understand you" says she icily.

"Then you shall! First Grant, and then Stairs."

Nell draws a quick breath.

"Captain Stairs!" Her astonishment is too great for words. "You are mad"—are the words on her lips, but by a supreme effort she subdues them. Her thoughts have flown to Cecilia again. If this can help her. . . . All at once she determines to accept the situation for Cecilia's sake.

"Yes—Stairs." He looks at her, expecting, hoping for a denial, but none comes.

"You don't deny it then?"

"No," haughtily, "I deny nothing."

"You have changed your tactics. Last time you denied everything."

"I am sorry I went to so much trouble. I forgot myself greatly when I did."

"You admit then that you spoke falsely to me with regard to Grant."

"I admit as little as I deny," says she, lifting her eyes suddenly to his. There is a touch of fire in them. "Has it occurred to you that you are calling me a liar?"

"No," says Wortley, whose face is now rigid. "The only thing that has occurred to me is, that you ought to be ashamed."

"So I am," she laughs suddenly, bitterly—it is the shortest, the most miserable little laugh—"of you!"

"It is kind of you to give me even so much attention, especially as I cannot see how it is deserved."

"Don't you? Is there nothing shameful in attacking me as you have done—of accusing me of all sorts of terrible things—of being abominably rude to me—of——"

"All this simply means," says he coldly, interrupting her without apology, "that you refuse to see yourself in the wrong."

"Wrong! There is *no* wrong."

"Of course not," with a disagreeable smile that enrages her, "women are never wrong. Let it rest there."

"No," quickly, passionately. "It shall not rest there. You *shall* speak."

"You order me about a good deal," says he, in an amused sort of way that is almost cruel—"should one order one's guardian like that? You have courage for so much, but after all you have not the courage to acknowledge your own faults; to see——"

She checks him.

"Oh, courage," says she contemptuously. "The want of that is not my besetting sin. Why," leaning towards him, "as you see, I have courage enough to defy you. You," with a strange laugh, "the arbiter of my fortune, the director of my life! I defy you, for example, to tell me how I am in the wrong."

"There is no occasion for defiance," says Wortley icily. "I know you are in the wrong when—amongst others"—(this is bitter) "you encourage Grant without definite designs—without having made up your mind to marry him."

"Are you so sure of my mind?"

A pang that he cannot, or will not, acknowledge shoots through his heart. The girl sitting on her horse in an easy, pretty attitude is looking down at him, a half smile upon her lips, a smile of scorn, and wrath, and something else impossible to understand.

"I don't presume to be sure of anything. I, however, accept your present hint. I only wish you had spoken sooner. To me"—he clears his throat—"Grant seems a very suitable husband for you. I wish you had spoken before. I should certainly have made no objection. If he has not money, he has a profession, and he will get on in it, no doubt, and his family is excellent. I really wish you had let me into your confidence before. For my part I think him a very good fellow. If you had told me before of your lo—affection——" he stumbles over this unmistakably, but without losing hold of himself altogether. "If you had told me you wished to marry Grant—" here another stumble—"I should, as your guardian—have given you all the help I could."

He stops, he has shifted his gun from one shoulder to the other, and back again, and still is waiting for her answer. Why he should wait is not clear to him. All he knows is that he is waiting, and that her answer, when it comes, will mean life or death.

"You are *too* good, *too* kind," the answer comes at last from lips parted, pale, but smiling. The smile is distinctly hostile, and in the eyes dwells hostility too, and something more that goes to Wortley's heart—is it wrath or hatred or—grief?

"But as a fact—you are fond of facts, are you not?—

I do not want to marry Captain Grant or Captain Stairs, or—" with a direct and angry glance at him, and with eyes that flame anew, "*anyone.*"

A moment later and she is gone.

CHAPTER LI.

"This thought is as a death!"

GONE! Her pretty mare, always a little restive under control, gladly springs forward beneath the touch of her mistress's light hand upon the curb and soon both are racing across field and moor again.

The wild excitement of the gallop falls in well with Nell's present mood, the air flying past her face seems to soothe her, and take from the late passage of arms much of its bitterness. For one thing it leaves her small time for thought, and coming to an old iron gateway that leads through a once handsome, but now deserted and weed-grown avenue to a magnificent view of the sea, she determines on carrying her ride so far. Yes, she will go up to the top of Lone Crag, and there watch the waves beat their hearts out against the rocks.

Bringing the mare to the gateway, she bends forward, and tries to lift the latch with the handle of her whip, but Miss Jenkins, restive always, sidles backwards and forwards, preventing her from attaining her object.

However, after two or three ineffectual attempts, she manages to get the gate open in spite of her, and giving it a vigorous push with the handle of her whip, leads the mare through. The push, unfortunately, had been too vigorous—the gate, though old is well hung, and coming with a crash against the stonework at the other side, swings back again violently against the mare's flank. The latter, irritated no doubt by the many checks during her morning's gallop, and never of a very satisfactory temper, becoming thoroughly unnerved by this unexpected shock, rears frantically, plunges forward, rears again—and throws her rider heavily!

There had been one sharp cry—no more. Nell, expecting the reclosing of the gate as little as the mare, had been quite as unprepared for the shock, and the second rear had flung her right out of the saddle—some merciful help from heaven having loosed her foot from the stirrup. It was all so sudden, that she had hardly time for thought—for fear, and the mare, after that last rear, had bolted, leaving behind her on the moist earth, a slender figure huddled up—senseless—motionless!

Now the last sound of the mad brute's flying hoofs has ceased upon the air. Nothing is here, but silence, deep and lasting. A little frightened hush seems to have fallen upon everything.

“Not a breath crept through the rosy air,
And yet the fresh leaves seem'd stirr'd with prayer!”

Once a chaffinch, creeping close to the small gloved hand, regards it searchingly, with its head bent to one side—then, as if terrified, flies away—though surely there was small cause for fear in that little lifeless palm. The girl's hat has fallen off, and rolled to some distance from her, and the soft drowsy wind is playing with the curls upon her forehead. One foot is showing beneath the short skirt of her habit, the other is doubled up beneath her. Her pale lips are slightly parted, and the half-closed eyes seem gazing dumbly at the blue heaven above them.

* * * * *

Wortley, when Nell had ridden abruptly from him, had gone on his own way. This, as it chanced, led him by an oblique and much shorter route than she had taken, to the old gate through which she had striven to enter. His thoughts are bitter enough as he goes along, and so engrossing, that the partridges come to no grief at his hands. Perhaps, the bitterest part of his meditations lies in the doubt as to whether his part in the late encounter had been a very manly one. He had purposely offended, and almost insulted her—certainly she had considered herself most unkindly used. Was it all worth while? Could he change her mood—or alter her character? Was this senseless quarrelling

to be kept up for ever? And after all, what right had he to——

What is that over there? His thoughts come suddenly to an end. He had just been crossing a stile, and now stands on the topmost rung of it, with all the broad stretch of barren land below him exposed to view. Across it a horse is tearing, saddled, bridled, but riderless.

Great Heaven! it is hers! From where is it coming? He glances rapidly backwards, and from right to left, but nothing is to be seen. Flinging down his gun, he springs to the ground, and dashes across the country towards that part from which the horse had seemed to come. It is a bare chance, but he will use it.

As he runs, he never for a moment deludes himself. He might have relieved his maddening fears, by suggesting to himself that she had dismounted, and when safely on the ground, her horse frightened at some passing shadow, had bolted; that he would see her presently, and laugh with her over the absurd situation. No. No. He felt he should never laugh with her again—should never scold her again—should never—— Oh! God forgive him!—how could he ever have darkened the smile on that joyous face—should never make her unhappy again!

No hope at all beguiles his way—nothing travels with him but blackest despair!

Presently he reaches the road, and looks up and down it, breathing heavily, his eyes straining for signs. No, no sight of horse's hoofs anywhere! He was wrong then, the mare had not come up this road. Once again he looks straight down the road, this time, to where in the far distance the old iron gate can be seen.

Ah, *there!* Surely those marks in the dusty road outside the gate mean something. The gate too—is not closed as usual. In there she must have gone. It is a clue, at all events.

It takes him but two minutes to get to the gate—to push it further open, to——

* * * * *

He has fallen on his knees beside her, and lifted her head on his arm. Oh! Nell! Oh! *Nell!*

The dear little head, all crushed and soiled, and the

face, with the beautiful lips and the half-dead eyes, and that terrible smile—so calm—so placid! And the soft hair blown apart.

For a moment Wortley thought he was going mad, and in that moment he knew that he loved her; that he had loved her all along; from the very first instant he had ever seen her. He knew more than that—it seemed quite clear to him in that awful moment that he would never love a woman again as he had loved her. And she was lying here within his arms—crushed, senseless—perhaps dead!

He lays his hand upon her heart, but for awhile can feel nothing. Then at last it seems to him that some feeble throbbing can be felt. Thrusting his hand into his pocket he searches for his flask—to find nothing there. On most days he has taken a little whisky with him, but this day of all days he has come empty-handed!

Despair again seizes him, and he curses himself aloud as a fool. What is to be done? *What?*

Laying her down gently again upon the ground, he strips off his coat, and folding it, lifts her head, and lays it tenderly beneath her as a pillow.

So still, so quiet! He turns away from her, as if hardly daring to look again. Like that—lying there—so might she look if . . . His very flesh seems to shrink. Thrills of misery run through him. *Dead?* She cannot be dead.

Again he bends over her, his cheek to her lips. No breath—no faintest breath. He lays his hand upon her brow, it is cold—colder than before.

He springs to his feet, frenzy seizing him, and looks wildly towards the road. Is there no one? *Can Heaven forget?*

Heaven has not forgotten. Down the road comes a brougham—Mrs. Wilding inside it. The Wildings live just near this old deserted spot. Wortley, forgetful of his shirt sleeves, runs out to intercept it.

"My dear Sir Stephen!" cries Mrs. Wilding, thrusting a laughing face out of the carriage window. "Is it a duel—or—?" She has seen his face now, and cries quickly, all her gaiety gone, "Oh! *What* has happened?"

"Come—come!" says Wortley, "Miss Prendergast

has been thrown from her horse, and is——” He cannot bring himself to utter the words, “dead—or dying.”

Mrs. Wilding opens the door of the brougham—Sir Stephen has forgotten to do it for her—and springs to the ground. Besides what he has said, a glance at his face has told her that something is dreadfully wrong. She follows him quickly to where Nell is lying, a little forlorn figure upon the sweet wild landscape.

Mrs. Wilding who, like many frivolous persons, is *au fond* extremely clever and capable, kneels down beside the prostrate figure, and loosening the clothes on the chest, runs her hand inwards.

“She is warm, and she breathes,” she looks up at Wortley, whose face is terrible. “Sir Stephen, you must take the carriage and——” All at once the terror on Wortley’s face and the meaning of it becomes clear to her. “No”—rising hurriedly—“you will stay here, and I shall hurry back and get the landau with——”

“No—you stay!” says Wortley vaguely, “I’ll——”

“Better not. I can give directions. I shall bring the landau with a stretcher in it, and a mattress, and George. I’ll be here in ten minutes.”

Sir Stephen lifts to her eyes full of gratitude.

“For God’s sake, hurry!” says he hoarsely. “*He* will reward you! I think you are the best woman I ever met.”

Mrs. Wilding gets up from her knees, her Parisian skirt extremely muddled, and runs back to the brougham.

“Home! Home!” cries she to the coachman, and presently Wortley finds himself alone again with his little silent companion.

How frightful the silence is! How cold she seems lying there. Unable to bear this thought he lifts her head and holds it against his heart. There it lies immovably—without a knowledge of its resting-place. The thought that if she *were* to know, she would have despised this resting-place, have refused it, adds to the poignancy of the heart! It seems to him as though he is acting dishonourably towards her, is compelling her to accept from him a love she would, if she knew, have scorned. Here she lies in his arms unable to reject—to scorn. . . .

Will she ever be able to see him again? Is life still with her? How still she lies—how horribly quiet! So she might lie in her grave clothes—with her eyes shut for the last time!

As though this thought is intolerable he rises, laying her gently back upon his coat, and going to the gateway, stares eagerly with miserable eyes along the road.

Will no one ever come? Ah! there—surely!

CHAPTER LII.

“Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily.”

At last! At last the sound of wheels! And now the landau is outside the gate, with a stretcher arranged in it from seat to seat, and on it a soft mattress. George Wilding is with his wife this time, and follows her anxiously to where the slender body is lying—still mute as death itself—still utterly unconscious. Mrs. Wilding stooping over her, slips her arm under her neck.

“Now lift her!” says she in a whisper that comes so naturally in the presence of death or disaster of any kind—and Wilding, in obedience to a sign from her, gently inserts his arms beneath the body, near the feet, Wortley making a third part of this human stretcher beneath her waist. With all the tenderness in the world they raise her, but, in spite of their care, a slight groan comes from the poor child they are carrying. Wortley hearing it, turns as white as paper, and casts an agonised glance at Mrs. Wilding.

“No—no,” says she hastily, and with the quickest sympathy. “Don’t think about that. Thank God rather, that she is *able* to make a sound.”

Such hope does she give him, and he gladly catches at it. Indeed, Mrs. Wilding at this painful moment proves the good that is in her, and many of those who are always only too ready to malign her—condemn her as vain and frivolous—might well have been shamed to-day before the strength and humanity she shows.

They have laid Nell upon the mattress now, Mrs.

Wilding taking one corner near her, and half kneeling indeed, so as to be of service at any moment. She had compelled Wortley to take the seat opposite to her, understanding in her quick way, that he would not lose sight of the senseless face for even a second if possible. Wilding has sprung up beside the coachman.

"I suppose you thought me dreadfully long," says Mrs. Wilding, glancing up at Wortley, as the horses go carefully over the road. "It must have seemed horrible to you alone there. But I hurried all I could, and I think I arranged as well as possible under the circumstances. You," *very* kindly, and not looking at him now, "must not be too down-hearted. I feared for her leg, its being twisted beneath her like that—but I am sure it is not broken, and George sent a messenger on horseback to Doctor Bland, so that I think he will be there before us."

They had decided on taking her home at once, a side road that leads to Gaveston Park, being only a quarter of a mile farther than the drive to Wilding's house.

Sir Stephen casts a glance of undying gratitude at her, which after all she does not see; but he never to the day of his death forgets this hour, and the part she played in it!

* * * * *

It is quite dark now. The night has descended. Wortley in the drawing-room at the Park is walking up and down—alone. Dr. Bland had been on the spot when they brought the body home, and a great man from town had come by the six o'clock train, having been telegraphed for. A frightful silence seems to reign over the house, and not even the foot-fall of a servant can be heard here, in this long, gaunt drawing-room.

An hour ago, indeed, a servant had come to ask if he should light the lamps, but Wortley had begged him to let things be as they were—the darkness seemed more supportable than the light, and outside the night was tranquil, and there was a promise of a moon.

It was frightful for all that, waiting here, listening for sounds—wondering what the doctor's verdict would be—unknowing whether life still dwelt in her. A hundred times he had gone to the open door and listened, and twice he had crept half way up the stairs, but no sound

came to him—no faintest whisper of a voice, and he had crept down again, haggard, miserable, half mad with suspense.

Now again he goes to the door listening—listening always, but again nothing but this ghastly silence. What are they doing up in that room, with his poor love—his heart's delight—fighting with death? Oh! to know *something*—anything!

Suddenly the thought of going out and standing beneath her window occurs to him. It will be a relief, at all events, it will give him something to do. A few stars are shining now, and the moon's pale radiance is casting shadows amongst the laurels. Here, here is her window; a little light streaming from between the closed shutters, tells him he is right, and breathless, absolutely wretched, he watches it.

All at once a sharp cry reaches him, coming from the room above—a most bitter cry, that dies away into a thrilling shriek. Wortley's heart stands still. For a moment a grip upon it, as of a hand, renders him senseless to all but that fierce, low, agonized cry; but presently he wakes to the fact that it is ended, and that he is standing out here with his hands clenched, and with a fine night wind playing upon the thick moisture on his forehead—moisture born of anguish.

Was that her dying scream? Was it all over? He went back to the house and through the window again, and so to the door and the hall. Now there were swift goings to and fro upstairs and for a minute the sound of human voices. *The room, her room was open.* Then the door shut again, and all was still. She was not dead, however, so much he knew involuntarily by those muffled sounds above.

Back to the drawing-room again, and to and fro—to and fro. To remain still is impossible. Presently he becomes conscious that something is in the room besides himself, and turning, a most forlorn little boy comes to him, fastening frightened little fingers on his coat.

"Where's Nellie?—what are they doing to her?"

It is Geoffrey, neglected and forgotten by the servants.

"God knows, my poor little man," says Wortley, taking him up in his arms, and trying to soothe the broken-

hearted sobs that are bursting from the child's heart. Tired-out, hungry, and lonely, he is crying as though he would never stop. Presently, however, the sobs grow fewer, and Wortley, still holding him, sits down.

After a while, he knows the child is asleep, but still he holds him in his arms, deriving some strange odd comfort out of his contact with the little slumbering form.

And time goes on—minute added to minute makes the hour. The moon is now quite brilliant, and is pouring its rays through the open windows on to the drawing-room carpet. And now there are footsteps in the hall, uncertain, stumbling. Wortley, his heart beating violently, gets up, and placing the boy upon a sofa, waits for what is yet to come.

The moonbeams light up Cecilia's face as she staggers into the room. Wortley hardly knows her. She leans against the lintel of the door, as if unable to go farther.

"She is alive," she says in a voice unrecognisable, "she will live. But her back . . . They fear . . . they think . . . she *will never walk again!*"

With a hoarse sob, she sinks upon her knees exhausted, worn-out with grief and horror!

CHAPTER LIII.

"And in my hart also,
Is graven with letters depe,
A thousand sighs and mo,
A flood of tears to wepe."

THE last remnant of Autumn is gone, and dreary December is well begun. To-day is dismal, and incessant raindrops patter against the window panes, whilst along the garden walks, tiny streams are rushing. No flowers, no sunshine, no blue sky, nothing but scurrying clouds, and passionate showers, and a wind that makes the casements shiver.

There is a roaring fire in the library, and on a lounge close to it lies Nell, in a loose white woollen gown, and

a fur rug flung across her feet. Here she lies, day by day, reading or talking to those around her, specially to her slave Geoffrey, who drags all his toys to the side of her sofa, and spends all his indoor hours with her.

Of visitors she has many, though never too many for her. In some strange, unexpected way she longs for them, welcomes them—perhaps it is a sad, lingering touch of vitality that makes her cling to the world outside, the world she never sees, that makes her accept thankfully a knowledge of it at second-hand. A month ago, she was allowed for the first time to come downstairs, and after that her friends and acquaintances were admitted to see her. Mickey had begged, borrowed, or stolen two days from his work in Ireland, to run over and look at her—a bare look indeed, as he arrived one morning, and had to leave the same day by the evening train. The meeting between the two, who had quarrelled straight through their entire friendship, was sad in the extreme, and McNamara returned to Cork more nearly heart-broken than anyone had ever believed he could be, with his careless, happy-go-lucky nature.

Even the strong-minded Maria was reduced to tears at the first glance at the little pale, mournful face, and had abstained from denunciations for an hour and a half. This might have been because she had filled up that time by explaining to everybody that if she had been on the spot instead of that senseless Stephen, Nell would now be on her feet again, and as well as ever. Better than ever apparently, according to her showing. She had, as usual, a dozen cures for every disease under the sun, and left a sheaf of them with Cecilia for Nell's immediate use. She had been unaffectedly kind and concerned, however, and everyone felt positively kindly disposed towards her, when she went.

Mrs. Wilding came very often, always cheery and delightful, but shockingly slangy, and Mrs. Chance had come once. It was impossible to be "nasty" before that pretty, stricken form, and Bella found it hard to be continually "nice," so after that first unavoidable visit, she stayed away—her brother making up for her deficiencies in this line. Yet every visit that Grant paid was pure agony to him, and at last became more than he could endure. His regiment had been ordered home,

and was expected next week at Beggars' Bush Barracks in Dublin. He determined to fling up the remainder of his leave and rejoin it there. He had not strength to watch Nell day after day chained to that dreadful sofa—his own sufferings seemed more to him than even hers. The strain was too much for him and he broke down. If there was even a chance of her ever being better. . . .

But that was all over. Hope, indeed, was at an end with all her friends. Even Cecilia, who had fought desperately against the first decision, had now given in, and no longer declared it impossible—*impossible*, that her Nellie would never move about again. Old Dr. Bland, cross-examined by Gaveston, had grown tender beneath the grief of everybody, and had ventured on vague comfort. "*Time* might do something. He had known cases where recovery . . ." Pressed even more anxiously, he had gone on to say, most reluctantly, as it appeared to Cecilia, who was present, that he *had* known two or three people, who, after a similar accident—or as nearly similar as possible—had after six months or a year, recovered the use of their limbs.

"Were those cases *quite* the same as this?"

"Well, no two cases were ever *quite* alike, but there was no such great dissimilarity, but that——"

He broke off there as if unwilling to finish his sentence, and began a new one.

"They must not be too sanguine. Hope was a delusive thing. He had known of a man partially paralysed, on whom an unexpected shock had had the most marvellous results, but such results were rare."

The big man from town, Sir Jefferson Jefferson, had said something nearly the same. Time, time! They must *wait*!

"Miserable comforters were they all." Who was to supply the shock that was to work the miracle? And the shock itself, what terror did it not evoke? Were they to desire evil, that good might come? What could a shock mean to them but further disaster?

* * * * *

Geoffrey has just poked the fire for the third time, at Nell's suggestion—who knows the thrill of fearful joy it gives him to see the sparks fly and the flames dart up—

wards?—when the door is thrown open and Wortley is announced.

“What a wet day?” says he cheerfully, coming over to the lounge and taking the small delicate hand extended to him.

“Yes,” she looks indifferent. She who used to resent a wet day, as a special grievance to herself—who used to mope in little pretty ways, when it was no longer possible to run through the gardens, or ride through The Park. “You should not have come out.”

“One chooses the lesser evil. At home I should have had a dreary day indeed. Here I have you to talk to. Selfish, isn’t it?”

Nell looks at him softly.

“Don’t you think I know?” says she. “You have come here to-day to make my day a little shorter for me—no more.”

“There is something more certainly. To make my own day a little shorter too. I am sorry for your sake that it is so dark and wet.”

“It is all the same to me,” says she, still indifferently. Her head is lying on her palm, her eyes gazing into the glowing fire. Geoffrey on the hearthrug is building castles out of bricks.

Wortley makes her no reply, for the moment indeed, reply is beyond him. That little form on the sofa, so still, so resigned—so humbly resigned.

It is her resignation that touches him most. Her utter giving in to her cruel fate! Could three months, three bare months have so changed any human thing? Where is the laughter now, that used to make gay the lovely eyes—where is the quick return, the saucy answer? The lovely eyes are quiet now—he can hardly bear the quiet of them—and her whole manner is so changed, and sadly changed, that scarcely he recognises it. Yet the change has not brought bitterness with it, or discontent, or wild regret, or angry rebellion against Heaven.

It has been known of some of the most perfect creatures that this poor earth can produce that, taken from a happy state to grief and ill-health, some of the finer feelings fell from them in their great stress—that the quick change from life to a living death, had broken

down their strongholds, and destroyed their fortresses and given them over to the enemy, bringing them even to a lower level than those, who (before Fate spoke) had been so sadly their inferiors in every way. Yet this poor child, who had aspired to nothing, has seemed to gather from her grief and pain only the sweetest graces.

The little petulant moods, that were only half meant always, where are they now? The angry shrug, the frowning glances. Gone! All gone!

A sharp sigh breaks from Wortley. Oh, that they were all back again.

"What are you thinking of?" Her voice breaks into his thoughts. The evening has lowered greatly since his coming, and only the splendid blazing of the fire lights up the room.

"Many things. And you?"

"You don't deserve to have your question answered. And yet—I will tell you. I was thinking of long ago, and that you need not have scolded me so very badly about my behaviour to Captain Grant, after all. You remember, don't you?"

"Did I scold you?" says he, a little choking sensation in his throat.

"You did," she turns from him with a touch of the old petulance. "And so uselessly too! You won't have to scold me any more. I couldn't marry him now even if I wanted to."

Wortley does not answer her. His anguish is too great for words. Getting up, he walks to the window, and stares with unseeing eyes into the growing blackness of the night.

"Come back," cries the soft voice, penitently. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." There are tears in the voice now. "I shouldn't have said that. And I meant nothing, *really*. Only you didn't understand me once. Come back, and forgive me."

"Forgive you!" His tone is heart-broken. He would have come back to her at once, but a sense of shame forbids him to let her see the tears that are standing thick within his eyes—he, who could not remember crying since his mother's death, and he was then such a little fellow.

"Come here," says Nell. And then miserably—"Oh, you ought to come. You know I can't go to you." This sad reproach brings him to her at once. "And I was wrong, I acknowledge it. I shouldn't have said it. You *will* come. . . . Stephen."

It is the first time she has ever called him by his Christian name, and it seems to add another pang to the moment. To Wortley who knows the proud, spoilt nature of her, it is plain that she must indeed have made it clear to herself that henceforth no man can woo or wed her—that love is dead to her—before she thus addressed him.

"I am here," says he, bending over her. "But as for forgiveness, Nell, what is there to forgive? It is I who should go on my knees to you. That last day, just before . . . I would to God I had been dead before I said what I did to you that day."

"There—there—there now," says she, putting up her hand and taking his. "I told myself you would think about that. And what was there to think about after all? You gave me a good scolding, which I resented—but which I well deserved, all the same."

Wortley with the hand she has given him clasped in both his, feels his grief grow keener. This sad submission, how unlike it is to the demeanour of the angry, defiant child who had ridden away from him on Miss Jenkins' back, who had scorned his authority?

Nell glancing up sees the anguish on his face.

"Oh, I *wish* I hadn't vexed you like this. How selfish I am—saying just what I want to say without thinking. Do you know," beckoning him to come round, with eager fingers, until he is again beside her, on the hearthrug, "I have to fight all day long against this selfishness? I often with my complainings make Cissy and the others unhappy. And that!"—leaning towards him—"is unfair, you know, because neither Cecilia nor Peter have made me a——"

She throws herself back suddenly, and crushes her eyes with her hands.

"Oh! To say it," cries she in a strangled voice. "But I *will*!" passionately. "I must!—I must learn to say it. A cripple! . . . a cripple! That's what I am."

Wortley's heart seems to stand still. How is he to

comfort her? How? As he waits—a little form pushes past him. Geoffrey amidst his bricks had heard that cruel cry, and has run to his auntie and flung himself upon her breast.

"Nellie—Nellie—Nellie!" cries he, clinging to her. "Don't cry—don't. I love you. I do!"

Oh, dear little arms!

CHAPTER LIV.

"How bitter and winterly waxed last night
The air that was mild!
How nipped with frost were the flowers last night,
That at dawning smiled!
How the bird lost the tune of the song last night,
That the spring beguiled!"

SIR STEPHEN had wisely left her alone with the child, and gone home with an insufferable pain at his heart. He had meant to wait until Cecilia's return—who had gone to pay a long-promised and expected visit to a neighbour, ten miles away—but he felt that the child would do his poor little sweetheart more good than he could. He had hoped to sit with her until Cecilia's return, but it seemed impossible.

At this moment Cecilia, springing from her carriage, runs hurriedly up the steps to the hall door, anxious to get back to Nell as quickly as possible. It was against her will she had gone to pay that visit so far away, and she had been fretting all the drive home at the length of time that had elapsed since last she saw Nell. Cecilia's devotion to the poor little sufferer had been marked, and was full of an affection so strong and lasting, as to astonish those who, not unnaturally, had arranged her character for her as a frivolous creature, a coquette, or perhaps something worse; at all events, one whose feelings would always be but skin-deep, mere surface work.

Just inside the hall door, she finds Grant talking to the butler.

"Oh, it is you, Mrs. Gaveston," says he, eagerly. "Can I see Miss Prendergast, even for a few minutes? It is late, I know, but——"

"It is six o'clock," says Cecilia, gently. "She is often a little tired at this hour. Is it *Need* you see her just now?"

"I must. I"—with agitation—"I have decided on throwing up the rest of my leave, and rejoining. There"—brokenly—"is no use in my staying here."

"No," says Cecilia. She feels sorry for him. "If I let you see her, you will be careful, you will not distress her, unnerve her in any way? You know we have always to be very anxious about her." Cecilia does not know of Wortley's late visit, or the agitation arising out of it, or she would have sent Grant away without hesitation, in spite of her pity for him.

"I shall take care. You *know*"—miserably—"I should do that. And I should not have come now but that I, at the last moment, decided on going to-morrow."

"That is sudden, surely!"

"No! I have felt for days that—I could not stay here."

"For days!" Cecilia looks at him. "I *wish* you could have arranged to bid her good-bye in the morning, when she has more strength," says she. "Still, as you are going to-morrow. . . ." He follows her, but at the door of the library, she motions him to stay there. Going swiftly into the room herself, she bends over Nell, and kisses her fondly. Nell is quite composed again, and lying on her cushions with the faint light from a rose-shaded lamp upon her face, looks singularly well. No traces of her late tears are evident.

"Alec Grant wants to see you, Nellie darling—just for a minute or two. I said he might come in, if you feel well enough to see him."

"He can come," says Nell, indifferently, "but don't let him stay long. Hurry off with your things and come down, I want to hear about your visit. They were at home, of course. . And Tilly—what of her?"

"Wants a strait waistcoat worse than ever! I shan't be long. But"—whispering—"I fancy Alec wants to see you alone! He"—in a lower whisper—"is going."

"Going!" startled.

"Yes, away. To rejoin his regiment. He seems in great grief. I tell you to prepare you."

"Ordered to rejoin?"

"No, I think not. His own wish. If you would rather not see him, a little note would——"

"I shall see him," says Nell.

Cecilia goes into the hall, leaving the door open for Grant to enter the room, then closes it behind him.

Going over to the couch, he looks down at Nell, with pale face, and working lips. He is no coward where physical matters are concerned, he had indeed distinguished himself in Burmah, where riots amongst the natives—often very dangerous—had arisen, but he was not strong enough to endure the sight of this hopeless, lingering grief, even though his endurance might tend to alleviate it. He fell short a little, there.

"She has told me," says Nell, delicately anxious to spare him further pain. The distress on his face is terrible. "You are going. You feel that you must go."

"Oh, it is that," says he. He falls on his knees beside her, and takes her hand, such a ridiculously small hand now, and presses his face down upon it. "I can't bear to look at you. It breaks my heart." Some strange revulsion in the girl's mind, here compels her to make an attempt to restore her hand to her own keeping, but he, in a fatuous way, clings to it. "It is killing me. I must go, I must! And yet, life without you . . . Oh! how miserable I am!"

He stops for a moment, and Nell waits patiently, if a little contemptuously. How like a weak girl it all is! Are some men like girls? A sudden thought coming to her, is as good as an answer. *All men certainly are not.*

"I am going. Our fellows are in Dublin now. I have come to bid you good-bye. I am going to-morrow."

His voice breaks. He loves her very honestly in his own way, but his grief has proved too much for him. He is anxious to hurry away, and leave it behind him. He has no suspicion of selfishness connected with his going, he feels himself indeed the aggrieved person. If Providence had left Nell whole and sound, he would have loved her to his dying day, so he tells himself, but Nell, not whole and sound, how is he to love her?

Lying there upon the sofa, crushed, beautiful, incapable of movement. . . . If life were treble its length, could he ever hope to marry her?

To the poor child lying on the sofa, his quick decision to go—to leave her—is very bitter. He had loved her in her sunny hours, when all the world was bright, and she the brightest thing in all his world—but now laid low and desolate, he shrank from her. He gave her up!

That seems the meaning of it! And the meaning of it really is that life is over for her, that the end of it has reached her before the beginning. She feels forsaken—left here to die or live as Heaven may decree—but of no consequence in the meantime to anyone.

"You are right, quite right," says she, in a stifled tone. "Here you are only wasting your time."

"Ah, you mustn't put it like that," says Grant. "Could I waste time with you? But to see you like this!" He bends his head again upon her hand; and again she feels the hand grow wet. Yet no tears stand in her own sad eyes. "Oh, my darling, that it should be all over. That life should end, like this!"

The words, fraught with real pain, strike cold to her heart. *Is it all over—all*; the sweetness, the beauty of life? Shall she never stand again? or walk from the table over there to the bookcase, or pluck a flower, or chase Geoffrey round the rosebeds! Oh, God. *Dear God!* have mercy!"

Grant's words have revived all the terrible resistance against her fate, that for the past months has been troubling her. She had fought, and told herself she had overcome, but now this open desertion of her, this casting of her aside as a derelict on life's ocean, has raised from the dead her buried agony.

Is she to be a living corpse for years and years, and years!

His face is crushed against her hand, so that the strange lights and shades upon her face are unknown to him. In five minutes she has gone through a very hell of misery—a hell made worse by the fact that she has to endure it without movement of any kind. Oh! all of you, who can rise and walk; think of the relief it is to be able to go to and fro at certain times—to pace a

floor—to push a chair aside—to—maybe, smash in pieces a fan—or a branch—to be able to *leave* a room.

Then all at once her pain grows less. Her eyes lighten, and a little suspicion of disdain comes into them. The disdain helps her. A scene has come back to her—a happy brilliant scene where the man—now kneeling at her side, with her hand clasped in his, and weeping over the fact that he must leave her, because of the grievous ill that has befallen her—stood and told her, in the bright summer sunshine, summer words.

“It would be great glory to die for you.”

The words come back now, and a pale smile lights her lips as she repeats them. To *die* for her when he cannot even *live* for her—when he must needs leave her because the very sight of her distresses him beyond endurance. “That life should *end* like this.” It is he who has elected to make an end.

The fact that she has never felt for Grant anything more than a girlish friendship, does not lighten the bitterness of his desertion of her in her need.

“You are going then,” says she presently. “Your regiment has come back, Cecilia tells me. You are going—where?”

“To Ireland—to Dublin. It is not so far away. Perhaps some time—— When I am quite well?” Her laugh rings a little hollow. “Yes: you must come back then. In the meantime, I am glad you are going back to your duties—you are very wise.”

She smiles at him from under the hand she has laid over her eyes. But the smile contains many hidden things.

He is forsaking her in her trouble, before his duties compel him to do so, and such forsaking seems cruel to her. She had never cared for him in any way, yet this open forsaking of her cuts to the poor child's very soul! She is of no use at all, it seems! No longer will *anyone* find pleasure in her.

Grant has not the first place in these despairing thoughts; and yet the one who *has* that place is, with a determination worthy of an older and stronger mind—pushed deliberately aside.

She is cast adrift—a bit of the flotsam and jetsam that lie for ever drifting here and there upon the waters

of life—a poor little crushed bit of timber that no one would care to drag to land.

"It is not wisdom," says Grant at last. "It is misery! I shall think of you, and you always. I shall never," with dismal conviction, "think of anyone else if I lived—for ever."

"That's a long time," says Nell, with a wretched little smile. "Does anyone live for ever? I hope *I* shall not. And as you *are* going to Ireland?—well, then, go."

"Nell—what a last word."

"I'll improve on it. Go—in peace."

"I shall go in sorrow," says he, breaking down again, and then, slowly—very unhappily—"Nell, may I kiss you?"

"No." Swiftly she lays her hands across her lips; there is even terror in her action.

Grant rises to his feet.

"Not even so much?"

"I cannot."

She has taken down the right hand, but still keeps the left across her lips.

"You never loved me," says he.

There is no answer.

He moves to the door.

"But—I liked you," cries she. It is a most miserable little apology.

* * * * *

Entering his sister's house twenty minutes later, Grant finds her in her tiny drawing-room.

"It is over," says he. "All over!" The dull misery in his face does not touch her sufficiently to prevent her reply.

"I'm glad of it," says she. "It is just as well as it is, Alec, believe me. You would never have been happy with her. She is a most undesirable person. I detested her from the first, though I never *said* so."

"She is the last person on earth to be detested by anybody," says Grant hotly. "She is——"

"Yes?" derisively.

"The very first person to be admired by everybody! Why," turning upon her angrily, "you used to think her perfection when first I came here. You saw no fault in her then."

"Not *then*," says Mrs. Chance, smiling her curious smile. "You could have *married* her then! But now! I could have endured her for your sake—because she might have helped you in your career; but I always hated her. She was antagonistic to me in every way, but you know the old lines:

"O, what a world of vile ill-favour'd faults
Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year."

Her 'three hundred pounds a year' would have been very useful to you."

"I had forgotten that she ever had a penny," says Grant. "I'd have married her gladly without one, but for this awful misfortune that has befallen her."

"I daresay; there are always fools in the world," says his sister with a shrug.

CHAPTER LV.

"This bitter love is sorrow in all lands,
Draining of eyelids, wringing of drenched hands,
Sighing of hearts and filling up of graves."

CHRISTMAS has come and gone, that saddest time of all the year for those whose hearts are weary, and a New Year has dawned. A New Year that seems to have little prospect of happiness in it for those at Gaveston Hall!

It is still early in January, and Cecilia going listlessly up the grand old oaken staircase, pauses at different niches to notice with a half-hearted admiration the glorious pots of chrysanthemums standing in them. Tall and stiff they hold themselves—bronze and white and cream, but, for the most part, deepest yellow—with a view, no doubt, to lighting up the staircase. Erect and stately they salute her as she goes by—a golden glory in the misty darkness of the lamp-light.

Cecilia stops to pat their lovely faces, and to gaze into their golden hearts. She seems glad to stop now and

then. Her step is heavier than it used to be, and something of the old glad light has passed from her eyes for ever. Her smile, too, is less ready, and when it comes—unwillingly always—it is as sad as tears.

A clock downstairs striking the hour, rouses her from her contemplation of the chrysanthemums. Five o'clock. Not later than that? There are sounds of coming storm in the air, and the light of heaven has been darkened even earlier than usual on this winter night. So early that the servants have seen fit to supplant it by lights of earthlier mould.

Cecilia, hastening her footsteps, goes farther up the stairs, then pauses again to look through a window into the sullen blackness of the night.

All day—all day her thoughts have been with Phil. Fight with them, conquer them as she will, they rise, even half-slain, to challenge her again. Now they are enveloping her in on every side, and fresh battle must be done before she goes on to Nell, who to-night is lying in her boudoir—Nell, who has been a little capricious, a little restless of late—to whom change seems positively necessary, be it only from room to room.

Presently Cecilia, having cast her particular Satan again behind her, goes in languidly to where she knows Nell is expecting her. As she reaches the door, a servant overtakes her, a telegram in his hand. There was no answer, the man said. Cecilia, taking it, idly and without interest, enters her pretty boudoir, where Nell is lying, with a book and a shaded reading-lamp on a small table near her. The room is bright with flowers and lights, and the gay crackling of a roaring fire.

"A telegram?" says she with some interest, as Cecilia stoops over her to kiss her. It has seemed to Cecilia lately that she can never kiss her enough. Dear Nell! Poor—*poor* Nell!

"Yes. How are you now, darling? Not too tired?"

"Not tired at all. And this book is charming." She lays down "The Little Minister" as she speaks, somewhat reluctantly. "But your telegram! Is there anything in the world so exciting as a telegram? Open it. It may be important."

Mrs. Gaveston laughs, glad at the quick interest she takes in it.

"Important, and to *me*?"

"Why not to you?"

"A woman of *no* importance?" Well—here it is." She opens it with careless fingers. "I always look at the name first. The message is always a poor thing next to that."

Her eyes are on the pink paper now—on *the name*!

Suddenly she throws up her head as if mortally wounded, and her fingers close convulsively on the bit of paper—reducing it to a crushed ball. Now she turns her eyes on her sister.

"Cissy—what is it?" cries Nell terrified.

"He is dying."

"He?" Nell, although she asks the question, *knows*.

"Phil! He is dying!"

She looks dazed—like one hardly understanding. Then suddenly a fit of shivering catches hold of her. "Dying—dying!"

As if the repetition of the awful word has caused a revulsion of feeling, she all at once grows calm again.

"It isn't true. Of course"—with emphasis—"it isn't true. But I must go to him."

"Go?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Now, not a word, Nell. I shall go, though you, and Peter, and the whole world held me."

"Go where? Give me that telegram."

"He is at Burnley." She had had only one glance at the telegram, but every letter in it seems burned into her brain. Burnley is ten miles from Bigley-on-Sea. "He is dying at Burnley. And he has asked me to go to him." She is standing, white, rigid, looking before her, with a curious light in her eyes, as though they are looking at something beyond the wall that bounds her gaze.

"How can you go?" says Nell.

"I shall go."

"But——"

"It is useless, Nell."

"Oh! no! You will listen! You will, darling." Seeing Cecilia's utter indifference to her words, she loses her head a little. "Oh! dear, dear Heaven, why am I chained here, why can't I help her?" She beats her

hands frantically against her breast. "Cissy—listen—listen."

What had she meant to say? In her terrible agitation she forgets everything, and sinks back exhausted against her pillow.

"I shall go," repeats Cecilia slowly, firmly. To Nell she appears taller in some strange way, and singularly decided. It is doubtful if she has ever heard the girl's passionate appeal. Her eyes are still staring straight before her, and now there is a tragic look in them. If her face is cold and white, it is still quite composed, and she stands erect, disdaining, as it were, even to rest her hand upon the chair near her. She feels strong, determined. Everything seems blotted out from her, save the fact that she must go to Phil, and soon—at once. Even Nell is forgotten, as, with a quick step, she turns and leaves the boudoir.

In her bedroom she unclasps her hand, and pulling out the telegram into readable form again, looks at it.

"I am dying. Come to me."

So terse—so plain—and yet filled with an agony unbearable. "Come to me." Yes, she will go to him, though it cost her her life, and all that makes life dear. Once she had refused to go with him, now—what shall keep her from him? The paper lying in her hand seems to burn itself into her palm. *Dying!*

For a long, long time she stands motionless. Then suddenly, as if recollecting the passing of time, she slips the telegram into her bosom, and going to her wardrobe, pulls out with feverish haste, a cloak, a hat, and some furs. She has made no plans up to this—she is so accustomed to have all her plans arranged for her, that she has forgotten to make any—but now the fact is forced upon her that she will have to give orders. A carriage will be wanted—and—

How is she to get away without Peter's knowledge? That seems easy enough. Peter is in the library, lost amongst his newspapers, and will be blind and deaf to everything until the dressing-bell rings. There is plenty of time. She will be gone before he knows anything.

Gone! before he knows. He will know when she is gone!

She drops the cloak she is holding, and a frown gathers on her forehead. He will know—and he will think——

Oh! what does it matter what anyone thinks? There is only one thing to remember now. Phil is dying, and has sent for her.

She picks up the cloak again and throws it over her shoulders, and hurriedly covers her head with a little soft felt hat, and moves towards the bell. With her hand on it, she pauses.

To go like this—to steal out of the house without a word, a sign. She has not loved him as he might have been loved, but he has always been very good to her. Shall she face him—acknowledge all—then leave him?

No—a thousand times *no*! She takes her hand from the bell, and clutching at the mantelpiece, sways a little, her breath coming quickly, unevenly. To tell him—to see his eyes as she tells him. Never! Death would be better than that. She tells herself she knows him well enough to be quite sure that there would be no forgiveness for her, were they both to live a hundred years. He must think what he will of her. She can never tell him. Never!

And with this she finds herself moving towards the door, and down the staircase, and straight into the library where he is sitting, with the *Morning Post* before him.

As he hears her approaching footsteps, he turns his head slowly to greet her, as he ever greets her, with his tender smile. But one glance at her brings him to his feet.

“Good Heavens! What has happened?” exclaims he.

Her face is white and terribly changed.

“I have come to tell you something,” says she, slowly—coldly, as though feeling in her is benumbed.

CHAPTER LVI.

"There is no certainty in happiness."

AND then she told him! Deliberately, almost callously, in a low, monotonous tone that had ceased to be hers. He hardly recognised it, or her either. He listened, though without a comment, without a movement, save that once he laid his hand heavily upon the back of his chair, and tightened his grasp there until his knuckles showed white. His self-control was superb, and if she could have been impressed by anything in that awful hour, she would have been impressed by it.

The low, dull voice went on with its miserable declaration—a confession, or whatever it was—and he lost not one word of it, though through it all, he felt his whole life crumbling to dust beneath his feet. There was nothing left—nothing to hold by, to cling to, to save it from total wreckage. He felt suddenly old, so old, that he wondered if he had ever been young! And he had been so *sure*—so certain—so carelessly happy in his fool's paradise.

Had ever man been so befooled before? Had he been blind, deaf, *dead*, that he could not see? He had noticed that she had been a little depressed of late, but he had put it down to ill-health, and had implored her to see Bland, and Bland had assured him that once the winter was over, she would pick up again. It was nothing, he said.

Nothing!

Cecilia's now voice has ceased, and silence falls upon the room . . . through it, some lines he had read somewhere some time ago, seem to ring, beating feebly at his heart.

"My days are in the yellow leaf,
The flowers and fruits of love are gone.
The worm, the canker, and the grief,
Are mine alone."

If he had but known it, these last were his only possessions for many months. Love, blind fool! he had

dreamed of love! and where is it now, that dream? And life—what does life hold for him? Love is life—the beginning and the end thereof—and love has not once come nigh him.

He had not looked at her during her terrible revelation; nor she at him. Now he rouses to the fact of the continued silence, and all at once a mad fancy that it is not true, that he is sleeping, that he will wake soon to laugh at his hideous fears, gives him a false strength. He turns abruptly and looks at her, and that one look wakes him indeed. Is that Cecilia! that white, wild-eyed woman! Where is the pretty girl he used to know?

It is all true then. There is no doubt anywhere.

“Not poppy nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world”

could deaden him to his knowledge of the truth.

“That is all,” says Cecilia, disturbed from her reverie by that swift glance of his at her. “I must go.” She pulls her cloak round her with a shiver.

“Not quite all, I think!” His tone is even. “You say he asked you—when here, in my house—to go away with him.”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“I have told you. I refused to go.”

“Why?”

“I—” she hesitates as if thinking. Then says indifferently, “I could not.”

“But why?” persistently.

“I could not leave the child.”

At this, Gaveston gives way to a sharp, dry laugh that seems to rend him.

“You actually thought of him. Oh! the good mother!”

His tone startles her, it is so unlike Peter to be sarcastic, or bitter, or anything—save kind.

“Yes, I thought of the child. I could not forget him.”

“And the child’s father”—he moves a step nearer to her—“how was it with him? Did you forget him?”

His eyes are searching hers; there is a sort of cold fury in them. It shakes her. She had never seen him thor-

oughly roused before, and this man, with the piercing gaze, and the air of splendid disgust, seems unknown to her. It is as though she is now looking at her husband for the first time. She compels herself to answer him.

"Oh! I thought of you too. You"—she stops for a moment, growing agitated—"you had been good to me."

"Had I? It was very good of *you* to remember that insignificant fact. You acknowledge I was good to you then?"

His mocking, contemptuous air, restores her composure more than all his endearments could have done.

"Too good for me to betray you, at all events," says she, the softness gone from her voice.

There is a pause, and then:

"So you wouldn't betray me——"

The cold fury has now warmed into life, his nostrils are dilated. Going up to her, he seizes her by her arms.

"Betrayal! What is betrayal? That devil—did he ever kiss you?"

"Yes; once."

"Once—twice—twenty times."

In his mad passion his fingers tighten on her arms, bruising into the soft flesh—the arms that but an hour ago, he would have killed himself to spare one pang. Perhaps in her own excitement she does not feel the pain, but whether or no, she bears it without flinching.

"Once," she repeats firmly; "believe me or not as you will."

"Once, or twice—what does it matter?" says he, loosening his grasp, and flinging her from him.

"Once was contamination enough. And so"—here he looks at her with a glance that must have blighted her, had not her heart been filled with the face of another.

"He held you in his arms and kissed you—this man who was as my friend, who accepted my hospitality, who took my hand in his, who dwelt beneath my roof! You ought truly to be proud of your lover—but, had I been in his place—I should, at least, have tried to be a gentleman."

She turns upon him fiercely.

"He was a gentleman! It was I—I who persuaded him to accept your invitation here. I made him accept it. And you"—passionately—"how could *you* have been

in his place? How could *you* be my lover—you, whom I never loved?"

It is a cruel stab, born of a cruel moment. . . . Again the walls of the room have opened wide, and beyond, dying, lies her lover, waiting—waiting!

"I must go," cries she wildly, turning away.

"One moment!" says Gaveston.

His voice vibrating with a meaning she does not understand, arrests her attention.

She turns.

"I would know one thing more—I would fill up the picture. That once you speak of—*you* . . . kissed *him*?"

She returns his gaze unflinchingly.

At this moment she tells herself she hates him.

"Yes," cries she defiantly. "I kissed him too—I am as bad as he is, he is no worse than I am." It seems to give her a strange delight to make herself as guilty as the man she loves. "But once, once only! Oh!" Suddenly, sharply she lifts her hands, and pressing them convulsively against her eyes, breaks into bitter, dry-eyed sobbing. "Once. Once only. And now he is dying. Oh, Phil! Oh, my love. My love!"

Her strange weeping shakes her slender frame. Her dry sobs come slowly, heavily. There is poignant anguish in them.

Gaveston, as though maddened by the sound, lays his hands upon her shoulders, holding her as in a vice.

"Be silent," orders he sternly. "Have you *no* shame?"

"None. None—where he is concerned." Even whilst he holds her she looks back at him with wild but sad defiance. "I am neither sorry nor ashamed!"

"That is enough," says he. He releases her quietly. He has grown calm again, with a calmness that chills her more than all his anger has done. "If you are going you had better start at once. Shall I ring the bell for the carriage? By-the-bye, you quite understand what this journey means?"

"Quite."

"It will hopelessly imperil your reputation."

She bows her head.

"And your son?"

"Oh, my God!" cries she suddenly. Her face changes

from its icy immobility to a quick agony. "But"—wildly—"he will know—he will understand . . ."

"You are right. He will certainly understand."

She looks at him with miserable eyes. Too proud to entreat, she stands before him a picture of despair.

"You will tell him?"

"The world will tell him. I"—coldly—"should be the last to speak to my son of his mother's dishonour."

"There was no dishonour."

"We must leave that to the world too. A pitiless judge."

"But the child—the child! *You* know—you will tell him—you believe me, Peter—I see by your eyes that you do. *You* will tell him! You will have pity on him."

"I shall have pity on him!" The storm of his rage has died away, and Cecilia, with her dark eyes fixed on his, sees something in his plain, rugged face—something that might be called nobility. Her eyes fall—conscience-stricken she hangs her head. "If you will go," says he—he waits, as if perhaps in this last hour, hoping she will still see where her duty lies—but answer there is none—"I shall go with you."

"*You?*"

"I told you I should have pity on my son. He shall not, if I can prevent it, redden at the mention of his mother's name. Make no further delay"—there is an undisguised touch of scorn in his tone—"if you are ready—so am I. Let us get this thing over as soon as possible."

"It is to shield me," stammers she. "It is kind—"

He checks her peremptorily.

"Enough!" says he brusquely—with almost cruel contempt—turning to ring the bell. "I am thinking only of the boy!"

* * * * *

The carriage is ordered. Five minutes will bring it round. Cecilia has run upstairs once again to her room where Nell in an agony of suspense is waiting.

"I have come to bid you good-bye."

The tragic look is still in her eyes, now augmented by weariness. It seems to Nell that the farewell has something of the eternal in it. She makes a sudden involuntary effort—the effort of one who would rise and go

with her, and then with a groan remembering, she sinks back again, covering her face with her hands.

"Peter is going with me," says Cecilia stonily, "I have told him."

"Told him?"

"All!"

"And——?"

"There is no and. It is all over! I knew it would be, when I made up my mind to tell him. You remember once I said to you that Peter was a man who would never forgive. But"—slowly—"what I did not know was, that when the time came, I should not care!" She walks towards the window and looks out. "Oh!" stamping her foot, "will that carriage never come round?"

"Peter is going with you!" Nell repeats this as if stunned—it is as though she has heard, without taking in, anything else. "Peter knows!"

"Oh, yes—yes!" impatiently. "What does it matter? What does anything matter?" She pulls the curtains aside, again gazing out into the fast darkening night. "How long they are!" She beats lightly, irritably upon the sash of the window with her small, closed hand, as if half maddened by the delay.

Nell—faint, trembling, drags herself a little, upwards—slowly, painfully—clutching at the side of the sofa to help herself. So engrossed is she with fears for Cecilia, that it is not until afterwards, when pain has made her fall back into her original recumbent position—she remembers, that it is the first time for four months that she has unaided raised herself from her pillows.

"You must see," she says—"you cannot *fail* to see"—eagerly—"Peter's goodness in this matter! Oh, Cissy—it is not yet too late——"

The last two words fall like a death-knell on Cecilia's ear.

"Too late!" repeats she wildly. "You are right. I shall be too late. He will die, and not know that I was coming! Oh, Phil! . . . What—*what* can be keeping them! Perhaps"—she turns a wan face on Nell, "perhaps"—with awful suspicion—"Peter—has forbidden—the servants. . . . Nell—if that should be so. . . ."

"You must be mad to think that!" says Nell. It is at this point the pain grows overwhelming and she falls

back again upon her cushions. "Peter——" the words come in little gasps—"is indeed a stranger to you. He is . . . incapable of . . ."

A sound from Cecilia breaks in upon her hurried breathing.

"At last. At last!" cries she feverishly. The sound of wheels outside can be heard, and in a moment the carriage passes beneath the window, on the way to the hall door. She rushes to the door.

"Cissy, wait one moment," says Nell desperately—she holds out her hands with an imploring gesture.

"There is so little time," says Cecilia. She comes back, however.

"Just one promise," says Nell. "Whatever happens . . . *Whatever* happens—whether he lives or dies—promise me you will come back with Peter."

Cecilia breaks into a strange laugh. It is so reckless that it terrifies Nell.

"You should ask Peter to promise to bring *me* back," says she. "Haven't you heard me. Have you not understood? Peter will not forgive."

"He will bring you back if you will come."

"Are you so sure?" she smiles coldly. "There"—turning—"I must go!"

"Kiss me then," says poor Nell, sobbing. "My darling—my own sister." She holds up her arms, and Cecilia bends to her. Almost their lips have met, when Cecilia, seeing the pale, pure, now almost spiritual face beneath her, suddenly recoils.

"No!" says she; she pushes back the girl's arms as though dreading them and in another moment has left the room.

CHAPTER LVII.

"And saying so, the tears out of her eyes
Fell without noise and comforted her heart.
Yea, her great pain eased of the sorest part
Began to soften in her sense of it."

WORTLEY riding home from the meet at a rather unusual pace, stops in a bare space to look at his watch by the light of the rising moon. Of late—ever since Nell's

accident—he has fallen into the habit of going to see her every day—in the early afternoon, or else in time for tea. His watch tells him that he will be late for that—it is after six o'clock.

The meet had been at Tor's Place—a long distance from home, and to-day of all days the fox, an old dog-fox of considerable experience—had led them a run of twenty miles or so across a very stiff country. It is rather late to go on to Gaveston Park. Still to see her—that seems important.

He has long ago ceased to deny to himself that his one absorbing emotion in life is Nell. She—and she only—holds his heart in her two hands, and to keep away from her is difficult.

There is still a good hour before dinner, and ten minutes will take him there; he might get a glimpse of her, and then ride home. It seems impossible to wait until to-morrow for that glimpse.

He turns his horse's tired head towards the bye-road that leads to the Park.

Mrs. Gaveston was not at home, the man told him—that surprised him a little, as Cecilia had refused all invitations to dinner of late, all invitations of any kind indeed—a fact laid down by everyone to her affection for her sister—and at this hour where could she have gone except to dine with people some distance from home? It is still early. He hesitates, hardly knowing what to do, and then finally the man decides the matter for him.

“Miss Prendergast is still up, sir.”

Wortley nods and goes up to Cecilia's sitting-room, where he has often before this, seen Nell.

“So your sister has deserted you,” says he gaily, as he enters, but one glance at her checks him, and renders him suddenly grave. Lying there in her soft draperies, so pale, so wan, with the traces of tears still wet upon her cheeks, she makes a woeful picture, indeed.

“What is it?” he asks hurriedly. “What is the matter? You are lonely. They should not——”

“No. No.” She tries to hide her face from him with her hand, running it nervously over her eyes, as if to shut out the light; and Wortley, divining her desire to be as little seen as possible, takes the lamp nearest her,

and carries it to a distant table. "Something dreadful has happened," she says, trying vainly to check her emotion, and speak naturally. "Cecilia—we—have just had a telegram from—to say—poor Phillip Stairs is dying."

"Dying—good Heavens! A telegram from where?"

"From Burnley!"

"I thought he was abroad somewhere! Burnley; why, that is only ten miles from here. I passed it to-day."

"Yes; he is there. It must have been some horrible accident, I suppose; but we know nothing. Isn't it all dreadful?" beginning to cry again. "And Cissy—we—it has been a great shock to us. We were both of us very fond of him."

"I know he was a *quite* old friend of yours and Mrs. Gaveston's," says Wortley at once. "I hope she——"

"She has gone to him," in a low tone. Wortley can hardly restrain his glance of surprise.

"Peter has taken her," quickly. "He understands what a friend he was of ours. I was so glad," turning nervously away, "that they both went."

"Yes. It was much better, and just what one would have expected from Gaveston," says Wortley gravely, as befits the occasion, and without an atom of any further meaning. He rises, however, and begins to pace to and fro, the flickering firelight gleaming on his somewhat mud-bespattered breeches, and the red of his coat. Most men look well in their hunting clothes, and Wortley, a plain-featured man in reality, looks very nearly handsome to-night in his—so tall, so strong, so reliable. He also looks very grave, with his hands holding his whip behind his back, and his eyes bent upon the hearth-rug, where he has now come to a stand. All that gossip then was true! Good Heavens! what a situation! How will Gaveston take it—afterwards?"

"Was the message very urgent?" asks he presently.

"Very. 'I am dying.'" She cannot bring herself to repeat the rest of it. That "Come to me" was so fraught with unmistakable meaning. "We had no idea he was in the country." Not for a moment does she doubt Cecilia about this; and, indeed, Cecilia had not known. It had been a sudden freak on the part of

Stairs to come back and see her once again before leaving for India. "I suppose he was going to stay with the Lovells. You know they live at the far side of Burnley."

"Yes; I know. It seems very likely. I hope," his mind going back to Cecilia and Gaveston, "they will arrive in time."

"Oh! I hope so. Oh, poor, poor Cissy! Of course," hastily, "she knew him much longer than I did—much more intimately. She would naturally feel it more. You can see that."

"Of course," says Wortley, who is growing desperate beneath the knowledge that the baldness of his replies must seem suspicious to her; but the more he racks his brains for ordinary sympathetic expressions, the less he finds to say.

"Her face was so white—so changed!" says Nell miserably. "Oh, if only I could have gone with her. But I could be of no use to her—none at all; chained here as I am—a mere log—a burden."

She breaks again into bitter sobs, wild now and heart-rending.

"Oh, I must speak to you—I must," cries she. "Stephen, what is the good of your standing over there pretending you know nothing about it when— Oh, my poor Cissy, it will kill her. And Peter . . . Oh! *what* is to be done?"

Wortley has come back to her.

"Let us think it over. Let us *see* what can be done," says he gently. "And try not to cry!" His voice is low and steady and strong, yet full of passionate entreaty. He has drawn a chair close to her, and impulsively, without thinking, he slips his arm under her head and draws her to him. In the distress of the moment he fails to know surprise at the fact that he has had the courage to do this, and at the still greater wonder that she does not repulse him. Nay, more, she seems grateful for the tender support, turning her face to him, and hiding it against his arm, as if she finds comfort in his kindly touch. After a few minutes, indeed, her sobs grow less.

"What frightens me most," she goes on presently, "is what Peter will think about it. He never knew that

Cissy loved . . . Philip Stairs. And, indeed, it was all over. Oh, yes, quite all over. She had become reconciled. . . . And Peter knew nothing. He was happy with her. And now this awful thing has happened, breaking down the silence of years . . . betraying the whole sad story. How—*how* will it be with them after this?"

Wortley makes no answer. He has at last waked to the stupendous fact that Nell is lying with her dainty head upon his arm, contented—comforted. It seems too great a thing for belief! And yet there can be no doubt about it. The lovely face, now pale and distressed by tears, is beneath his eyes. A little ringlet of her hair is lying on his sleeve. And all too late, too late!

The poignancy of this thought—the terrible grief that lies in it, kills, in a measure, his sympathy with her grief. He hardly hears her, indeed, so lost is he in bitter dreaming on what might have been.

"If only I could have gone with them," says Nell, "I might have done something, or perhaps said something, to smooth matters. I might have softened the truth to Peter. I might have helped Cissy to some self-control. Oh!" with a shudder, "it is fearful to be tied like this. Here—here I lie, worse—far worse than dead."

The light from the distant lamps falling on her face makes it look even paler than it is. Death seems near her at this moment.

"Don't say that," exclaims he sharply. "Besides, you know Sir Jefferson gave hope. He spoke of time."

"Ah! words. Words!"

She sighs heavily.

"Why not," eagerly, "let yourself hope?"

"That," reproachfully, "is cruel advice."

"No. No. There must be grounds for it. See now, of late you have been looking stronger—more cheerful. To-night," with another rapid, fearful glance at her face, that is so dreadfully white and worn. "Of course to-night you are not yourself, but yesterday and all last week I have noticed a great change in you, and all for the better. Come now, take heart; you *are* stronger?" It is a question. She hesitates about answering it, and then almost irritably:

"I am afraid so!"

"Afraid! Nell!"

"Don't you see? Don't you understand? I am better, but I shall never be well. I shall never walk again. I know that. I shall live and live, and live, and always *here*," with a shuddering glance at the cushions. "Feeling better means so many more months, perhaps years, of it. Oh, no," with a sharp indrawing of her breath. "Not years, I hope. I have had enough of it. Sometimes," turning her sad eyes to his, "it has occurred to me that when I am dead, I shall lie here still. There will be so little difference. I shall be only a little stiller—a little whiter, that is all."

A groan escapes him.

"Can't you think of something else?"

"I can't. It is all I have to think of. Though, sometimes, I have other fancies . . . that some one is coming in through that door there to measure me for my coffin. No," quickly. "Don't let that distress you. Those are some of my happiest moments. I used to think"—mournfully—"that I should hate to die. The thought of death was horrible to me, but now—now I am afraid I shall live!"

Here the poor child, overcome with grief, both for herself and for Cecilia, hides her face against his sleeve again and cries bitterly.

"Those who love me should pray for my death!" says she.

"I shall never pray for that," says Wortley. "And—I love you!"

There is a short silence. She stirs restlessly, and presently moves her head from his arm back to the cushions again. Wortley, pushing away his chair, rises to his feet.

"You are very kind. And I know you wish to comfort me," says she coldly. "But—you go too far. To love me—*me*. You have forgotten, I think. . . ."

"I have remembered!" says he. "Well or ill, living or dead, I shall love you, and you only!"

He turns abruptly, to walk up and down the room with rapid strides, descriptive of his state of mind. Presently he stops close to her again.

"All this is madness," exclaims he, almost violently. "You ought to be taken abroad. Change of air, of

scene would cure these morbid thoughts. In France or Italy you would grow better, and——"

"Better—better," petulantly. "I don't want to grow better. I want to be *well*. I want to run about again as I used to do, to drive—to ride." Her face changes. "Oh, no"—with a quick, most unexpected gasp of terror—"I never want to *ride* again." She had raised her head a little in her excitement, but now falls back again, with a dull laugh—a laugh more sad than tears. "I need not have been so frightened, need I? I shall never be able to——" She breaks off once more, now thoroughly unnerved. "Oh," cries she bitterly, "never—never again. I shall never do anything again. My life is done—finished. And so soon. Oh"—turning to him with frightened, anguished eyes—"it is *too* soon!"

"It is, God knows!" says he. He falls on his knees beside her, smitten to the very core of his heart. It is all so inexpressibly sad—so hopeless—so forlorn. She is trembling, cowering before her cruel fate, with both her little shaking hands pressed against her eyes.

"Try to bear it," says he, feeling what a mockery his words are. Try? She will *have* to bear it, whether she likes it or not! Taking the hand nearest to him, he holds it in a firm pressure, and stooping, presses his lips to the back of it.

Perhaps this kiss, coming as it does from his grief and the disquietude of his soul, touches her. She makes no attempt at the moment at all events to withdraw her hand—she appeals to him in another way.

"Would you"—her voice is very quiet—"lift my pillows a little?"

It is a tacit command to him to release the hand, and instantly he lets it go. Raising her lightly—as he has so often done since her accident—he re-arranges the pillows, and lays her back again upon them tenderly.

In the lifting of her, however, it has seemed to him (a mere fond hope perhaps) that she is more able to help herself than formerly. She had put her elbow down upon the edge of the sofa, for example, and with the aid of it had almost raised herself without any assistance of his. A month—three weeks ago, she could not have *done that*. Surely it is a good sign—the best sign of all

—that health and strength are returning to her—that the injury to her back may not be so altogether hopeless as they have imagined.

"You ought to see Sir Jefferson again," says he abruptly.

"No. No more false hopes," says she, smiling at him a little sadly.

"But supposing they were not false?"

She makes a gesture, as if pushing something aside. The false hope, perhaps—and he feels it would be useless to argue with her now, after these long hours of strain. Now the little clock on the mantelpiece chimes eight.

"So late!" says she, rather faintly. "And you have had no dinner, and there is still a long ride before you. Oh! I am so sorry. How selfish of me to keep you. Your dinner will be quite spoiled by this time."

"And the cook furious," says he, piling up the agony. He laughs gaily. "Do you know I had forgotten all about it, but now that you remind me of it, I am starving. And you—where is your dinner? You were not the only selfish one, you see. I forgot all about yours. Let me ring the bell, and order you something."

"Oh! as for me, I can have something at any moment. But you—And to tell you the truth, I am not hungry."

"That's nonsense," says Wortley. "Every right-minded person is hungry at eight o'clock. I am, for one. See here. I'll make a compact with you. If you will promise to eat your dinner, I'll promise to stay and eat it with you. It will be basely inhospitable to say no to that, as I shall certainly get no dinner, or, at all events, a most uncomfortable one, if I go home now."

This naturally settles it. Women, as a rule, are not inhospitable, and it goes to Nell's heart to think of his being hungry here in her own house—as it is for the moment.

"Ring the bell," says she promptly, an order obeyed with alacrity by him, and which brings Marshall on the spot in a minute or two.

"Will you bring me some dinner here, Marshall?" says Nell. "And——" She hesitates.

"And will you bring *me* some too, Marshall?" puts in

Sir Stephen, coming boldly to his own rescue, as much as Nell's. "And will you tell the cook that I should take it as a favour if she would for once try to regard me as two persons instead of one?"

Marshall has gone away, discreetly smiling, only to presently reappear again, headed by old Jenkins, the butler, who bustles in full of importance—with a dignified air, and a tray most excellently loaded.

And now a little table is drawn close to Nell's couch, and the tray is laid upon it, with its chicken, delicately roasted, and some finely-sliced ham, and a very special little salad, and some other necessaries, and at Sir Stephen's elbow another little table to be looked at after, with a jelly and a small bottle of champagne, and biscuits and some curaçao.

It is quite a pleasant little dinner in spite of everything, and there can be no doubt but that Nell is very much the better for it. Had he not been there to persuade her to eat—to coax her to have a little bit of chicken, a mere suspicion of jelly, half a wine-glass of champagne—she would unquestionably have gone to bed without anything, or that poor substitute for something, upon which so many women fall back in hours of grief—a cup of tea. But in her anxiety to make him eat, she had eaten too, and is now feeling stronger and more hopeful. However, thinking of him, and the good dinner he had missed at home, she grows remorseful.

"You have had a wretched dinner," says she regretfully.

"I have had the best dinner I ever had in my life," returns he, "and undoubtedly the most enjoyable one. I also consider I have won a victory. I have made you do something against your will. You have eaten something too."

Nell reflects on this. Certainly, he *has* finished the chicken and the ham, and there is only as much jelly left as one could swear by. Perhaps he has not been so ill-treated after all.

"I think you must go now," says she gently.

"I suppose I must. Can't I do anything for you before I go. You—the others being away—is there nothing I can do?"

"Nothing, thank you," flushing faintly. "Marshall

can do all I want." She holds out her hand to him, and taking it, he looks at her with a penetrating glance.

"You will not think too much? You will try to be hopeful, and to sleep?"

"Yes. Yes." She smiles up at him. He hesitates a moment, then stooping, presses for the second time a kiss upon her hand and goes.

* * * * *

The storm has risen and is now howling madly—dashing showers of rain falling between the gusts of wind, but through the ride homeward her vision travels with him. Nell, as he found her crying—and then Nell with her head upon his arm: after which comes the memory of the little friendly intimate dinner, that tiny impromptu meal that could hardly go by so dignified a name. He had been allowed to help her, to tend on her, to tell her that this was good for her, or that. They had dined together. They two alone! Oh! if only all had gone well with her, they two might have dined together all their lives, he always tending, caring for her—her servant—her slave.

CHAPTER LVIII.

"Alas! for sorrow is all the end of this!"

THE storm is still rising, and now blinding, violent showers of rain are dashing along the darkened roadways—making more full, the already swollen rivulets that run by the edges of them—and clattering like hail against the windows of the carriage! The noise of their angry battery seems to make more deadly the silence of the occupants of it.

Not a word had been said by either of them since leaving Gaveston Park. What word indeed was there to be said? All the naked, miserable, unexpected (and therefore thrice hideous) truth had been told, and to waste further words over it seemed obviously impossible. To thresh it out, to reduce it to a still greater state of nudity—what good could come of that?

Yet the silence was ghastly. The more so, in that

both, in an unconscious way felt nothing could break it. Cecilia, lying back in her corner of the carriage deaf and blind to everything save the question—"Is it life or death that lies before me at the end of my drive?"—could not have spoken had she tried, and Gaveston would not.

Every now and then a flash of lightning lit up the country side, showing it bare, storm-swept, desolate. Sometimes the flashes illuminated the inside of the carriage, showing no less a storm in there, and no whit less of desolation. Both faces were set, as if turned into stone, but there was misery (if of a different quality) in the eyes of each.

Once, when the carriage in the natural darkness that usually follows upon the supernatural brilliance of a lightning flash, was driven over a huge stone threatening to overturn it, Cecilia threw out her hand, and a sharp cry escaped her. But Gaveston felt that there was no fear for herself in that quick cry, only a dread lest anything should occur—any accident—to prevent her being in time to see her lover alive.

His lips grew compressed as that word "lover" came to him, and an almost brutal expression replaced the usual gentle serenity of his face.

At last some stray lights from hamlets on the wayside, coming quicker and quicker, one after the other, warns them that they are nearing their destination—on the outskirts of the little town of Burnley. And presently taller houses loom through the darkness and the sound of the horses' feet grows less loud, as the noise of humanity grows louder. A gas lamp here and there, stationed like sentinels along the road, far apart, but evidently with an eye on each other and all that pass them by, bespeaks the town, and then, quite unexpectedly as it were, they have entered it, and presently the horses draw up before the principal hotel of this little place—an hotel that might without prejudice have been called an inn, except that it lacks the roses and honeysuckles, and sanded parlours and general cleanliness that are usually connected with that wayside place of rest. Here, there are no roses or honeysuckles—it would naturally be madness to expect them at this time of year. But alas, the sanded parlours are not here

either, and as for the cleanliness—the least said the better. Altogether it is a squalid, hideous hole.

The door is open, and the little hall inside—grimy, as though a scrubbing brush has not seen it for a twelve-month—is low, and dull, and mean in the extreme. It goes to Cecilia's heart that *he* should be here. Here! in such a place. And—perhaps—*dying* here. Oh no—no—no!

A waiter has come forward. A bowing, obsequious person, whose face is as grimy as the hall, and who would have been considerably the better for a change of linen and an energetic bath.

"You have a gentleman staying here," says Gaveston abruptly. His tone is low, but there is not the faintest suspicion of feeling in it. "Captain Stairs!"

"Yessir."

Here Cecilia, with one step, is at the waiter's side.

"He?" stammers she.

"Yes. Captain Stairs, 'm."

"He——" her lips almost refuse to move, "He——" forcing the words through her teeth, "is alive?"

"Yes'm," sympathetically, "jest that." Perhaps she is a wife, or a sister. "But——"

Cecilia sways a little and Gaveston catches her arm. His touch restores her. He is not aware of it, but it hurts her.

"This lady wishes to have a sitting-room for a few minutes," says Gaveston, without glancing at Cecilia, however. Feeling her stronger, he has taken away his hand from her arm, quickly—with undeniable haste—as Cecilia through all, is aware.

"Well, sir," says the waiter, pointing in a somewhat embarrassed fashion to the little dining-room, "the salone is vacant at present." His tone is extremely apologetic, and as he speaks, he throws open the door of the "salone" on his left with not altogether the air to which he has accustomed himself.

"You had better go in there," says Gaveston. His voice is low, and clear, and level, and by no means dictatorial in any way—yet Cecilia draws back.

"I want to go to him," says she, *her* voice is low too, but it is piercing. "I," she looks full at her husband defiantly, miserably, "have come here to see him."

"And I have brought you here to see him," returns he coldly. "In the meantime, if you can control your impatience, there are a few things to be seen to"—he pauses—It is cold out here. You had better go in—for a few minutes."

And indeed the hall is cold. The boisterous wind outside is blowing fiercely through the imperfectly-fastened door, and the loose casements of the windows. The waiter is still standing with the handle of the open door in his grasp, and Cecilia gliding past him, stands within the room—a faded, melancholy apartment, dirty, uninteresting, and unpleasantly redolent of food, and smoke. It is warm, however—a bright fire sparkling in a grate, that would have been big enough to satisfy the chills of a room three times its size.

Cecilia out of sight, Gaveston turns to the waiter. There cannot be said to be undue haste in his manner, but the waiter tell himself that the "gent" wants to know all he can know, in a hurry. Waiters are wonderful!

"Who is with him?" asks he.

"The doctor, sir."

"Go and tell the doctor that some friends of Captain Stairs have arrived, and wish to see him."

"Yessir."

The man had obeyed him, and is now, indeed, up three steps of the stairs, when Gaveston checks him. Peter has turned to do this, and has therefore his back to the "*salone*."

"Will he live?" asks he.

"No, sir. No, I'm told!"

"Well, give"—"my message to the doctor," he was going to say, but the rush of a slender body past him, the swift flying of small feet up the staircase near him, killed the words upon his lips.

Cecilia is now half-way up the stairs—and *now* she has turned a corner, and is out of sight. Mr. Gaveston looks after her, his face quite expressionless, and yet it seems in some queer way to have grown older, sterner.

"Pore lady! O course she's hanxious," says the waiter, with the compassion that all waiters seem to have in a high degree—laid by in tons, as it were—for

use as occasion offers, and ready to be turned on at a moment's notice. "The gen'l'man's wife p'raps, sir?"

"No, my wife," says Peter Gaveston in a singularly clear tone. "Mrs. Gaveston of The Park."

"Yessir."

Gaveston's tone is so devoid of all feeling, that the waiter misses the point he was so very close to, a minute ago. No romance here evidently. The captain must be the lady's brother.

"How did it happen?" asks Peter, slowly.

"Well, sir, it was"—the waiter lowers his voice, and shakes his head in true, confidential, style, "the most extraordinary thing you ever 'eard of. 'E was steppin' out of the train 'ere, at our station—seems he was comin' to stay with some people round about us"—the waiter is plainly of the opinion that the whole neighbourhood, aristocratic and otherwise, to say nothing of the town, belongs to the proprietors of the "Royal Hotel"—as it is most inappropriately called. "I forget the name just now, but"—catching his lips in his fingers and pulling them out, as if by their help to bring his brain to a happy state of remembrance.

Peter's hands clench involuntarily, but his face remains set, unreadable.

"Major Lovell, perhaps," says he. As he makes this suggestion for the waiter's future guidance, a sense of loathing fills him.

"I dessay, sir, very likely. The Major, one way or another, is always 'aving guests, keeps a open 'ouse, 'e does."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, sir, as 'e stepped out o' the train, there was a luggage barrow coming along, and—there had been rain off and on, sir, as you may remember, and it appears the platform was greasy, and the barrow was 'eavily loaded and ran against 'im, and tripped 'im up, and 'e fell with his forehead crash against a trunk that was iron bound at the edges, and, Law, sir, ain't it easy to kill some folk, and damn 'ard to kill the others?—begging your parding, sir, I'm sure."

The waiter had a mother-in-law.

"You mean to say——"

"That was all, sir. They picked 'im up and brought

'im 'ere, and Doctor Durrant 'e says as 'ow there isn't a chance for 'im—won't live till morning, he says. Seems he was delicate, 'ad bin abroad, and—but I beg parding, sir, o' course you know all that, being a friend o' his."

Peter is silent. To let that word "friend" go by without contradiction, is almost more than he can bear. But the child! The mother of his child must be protected.

"Is he sensible?" asks he presently.

"Now and again, sir, but not for the past hour, I'm told. 'E was sensible in the afternoon, and sent a telegram, I'm told, to some people 'e knew." Here the waiter pauses, and casts an inquisitive glance at the tall, immovable gentleman, whose eyes are always so persistently bent upon the soiled tarpaulin at his feet.

"Yes, I saw it."

It is the nearest approach to a lie that Peter had ever told in his life, or at all events since manhood forced the meaning of honour, and right, and wrong upon him. "I think I shall go up now," says he, after a moment's painful thought.

"Yessir."

The waiter prepares to lead the way, but Peter motions him to one side.

"I can go alone," says he, coldly, he knows he is dreading what the waiter might see, if he opened the door of the sick chamber for him. He puts the man to one side with an air of authority, and goes slowly up the stairs.

"Yessir, right 'and, sir, first door," says the waiter, loquacious to the last.

CHAPTER LXIX.

"Pain smote her sudden in the brows and side,
Strained her lids open, and made burn her eyes;
For the pure sharpness of her miseries,
She had no heart's pain, but mere body's rack.
But at the last her beaten blood drew back
Slowly upon her face, and her stunned brows
Suddenly grown aware and piteous,
Gathered themselves."

THE room is very dim, only one small lamp burning at the far end of it. This casts a dull shadow on the dingy bed where lies the dying man. Within the grate a sickly fire is flickering—going out for want of tending, as though they had forgotten to poke it, or thought it needless to keep it up—and all through the room the nauseous odours of restoratives and other medicines are floating.

Gaveston, with one hurried glance at the bed, takes in all the details, then turns determinedly away. He knows that Cecilia is kneeling beside it, the hand of the unconscious man clasped in both her own, and with her face pressed against it. There is unutterable misery in the attitude, a silent agony of despair, and he marks that too and remembers it—for ever! The slender, dainty figure, crouching in its silken draperies, and costly furs—so intolerably out of keeping with their hideous surroundings—the small, proud head so prone, the utter *abandon* of the whole picture, burns itself into his memory, and stays with him always.

At the end of the room, near the dim lamp, an old man—a very old man—the doctor evidently—and a woman are conversing in low tones. Gaveston goes straight to them, and the doctor looking up, makes a gesture of commiseration.

"I regret, sir," says he, in the quavering tones of old age, but with much kindness, "that I have no good news to give you!"

"Is there no hope?" Gaveston's voice being neces-

sarily lowered, the harshness and want of sympathy in it is unheard by the two listeners.

"None, sir. None. If you would like to telegraph——"

"To telegraph?"

"For another doctor; but I may as well tell you honestly that it would be of no use. An hour or two—perhaps minutes must bring the fatal close to this sad tragedy."

"I shall not telegraph," says Gaveston—his voice is still so low as to be meaningless to the listeners, and the lamplight is too uncertain to let the old Doctor's eyes read the expression on his face. The nurse has withdrawn a little distance.

"This lady," says Gaveston presently, indicating the motionless kneeling figure by the bedside—"she——" he stops short, "could we be left alone for a little while?"

"Certainly, sir," says the old man courteously. He bows. "These family afflictions are very terrible," he goes on softly in all good faith, and Gaveston does not undeceive him. Everyone will know to-morrow, of course, but in the meantime—— "And it is the more grievous here, in that nothing can be done. There is only *one* thing to be done, sir, and that is to throw one's grief upon our God!" Gaveston could have laughed aloud. "I shall take care you are not interrupted until you want me, or until!"—solemnly—"the end."

He mumbles something to the nurse, who very thankfully follows him out of the room and downstairs, with a view to getting a cup of tea, and having a gossip with the landlady, who is a cousin of hers. In Burnley, as in all small places, everybody is first or thirty-first cousin to everybody else.

A small room opening off the chamber of death, Gaveston goes slowly into it, the darkness—the loneliness being a source of strange comfort to him. Always the picture of the slight figure lying crushed against the side of the bed is before him, and here in the darkness, with nothing to come between him and his mental vision of it, it stands out boldly, and can be viewed by him as plainly as though he were in its bodily presence.

He had heard with a savage satisfaction that Stairs was dying, the traitor who had partaken of his hospitality, and then betrayed him—who, under shelter of

his roof, had stolen from him his most cherished possession, leaving his house desolate unto him from henceforth. All Stairs' qualms of conscience, all his strivings after honour, are, of course, unknown to him, and only the perfidy stands out clear and distinct.

Of what is *she* thinking now, he asks himself, in this dark room—a room so cold, that but for his burning thoughts, he would have felt frozen. *Her* perfidy had been no whit less than his. The woman who, calling herself his wife, had deliberately day by day deceived him with false words and smiles—her heart all the time throbbing for another. Of what is she thinking now?

* * * * *

God alone could give an answer to that question. Cecilia herself, kneeling, heart-broken—with her lips pressed to the nerveless hand beneath them, could not. She hardly knows how it is with her. A numbness of spirit, a deadly quiet has followed on her passionate expectancy. Her senses seem dulled, her heart a void.

Presently she stirs, and raising her eyes, looks long with trembling eagerness in the still face before her. How calm, how still. Already the earthly look has left it, and the sweet strange sternness of death is lying on lip and brow.

"Phil!" whispers she softly, as one might to a sleeping child that has slept so long that one fears it will never wake again. "Phil!"—Slowly she creeps to her feet, and bends down over him, and slowly too, with indescribable tenderness—draws her hand across his forehead, and through the dark masses of his beautiful hair.

"Phil!" breathes she again for the third time—it is an appeal so anguished—so fraught with an intense and overwhelming desire to bring him back again, if only for a moment—to see him eye to eye, to hear him, if possible—to let him know she had come at his call—so full it is of all these wild and desperate longings, that though the voice is but a whisper, it seems to reach him, to touch the heart now nearly cold, that has beat for her, and her only, all his life.

Whether the voice really reached his dying senses, or whether in the throes of death a last wave flung him once again for a moment upon the strand of life, no one can say—but at this moment he stirs a little, and opens

his eyes full upon her. In that supreme moment he sees and knows her; a faint—a mere shadow of a smile sweeps across his lips—a heavy sigh breaks from them; and then the slight flicker of recognition in them dies away, and the eyes, still open, stare—with the awful stare of death, not *at* her, but *through* her, into the immeasurable beyond.

“The colour of fair red,
Was gone out of his face, and his blood's beat
Fell, and stark death made sharp his upward feet
And pointed hands; and without moan he died.”

He is dead indeed. But Cecilia will not believe it. Her hand is still upon his head, and still the heat is in him—but presently—presently those awful eyes, immutable, calm, dreadful, appeal to her, and with a wild, strangled cry, she draws back her hand slowly, and slowly too, raises it to her own.

The low despairing cry reaches Gaveston in his dark room, and brings him to the one outside, where the dim flicker of the now fading lamp seems only to make darkness visible. Through the gloom he can see Cecilia, her hand crushed against her forehead, her body thrown back. Her eyes are wild. As he approaches her, she turns.

“He is dead!” says she, and then again—“Dead!”—as if surprised at the word—as if not believing. Gaveston, bending over the bed, looks at the dead man lying there, and then back again at her. The awful misery in her eyes touches him through all the hard coverings that grief and rage and scorn have laid upon his heart.

“Men,” says Ruskin, “are for ever vulgar precisely in proportion as they are incapable of sympathy.”

Sympathy wakes in Peter's breast—but it is the bare, far-off sympathy he would have felt for any other human suffering thing, and does not appeal to him as being a sentiment felt by him specially for her.

“It is all over,” says he, gently—it is an icy gentleness, however. “You had better come home.”

“Home?” She looks at him as if not understanding.

“To Gaveston Park, then,” says he coldly.

She makes a movement as if to go back to her dead, *and he moves aside as if to give her perfect facility for*

the step. This stops her, she looks at him, and then at the pale face on the pillow, and there her sad gaze remains.

"I shall see to all necessary arrangements," says Gaveston, interpreting her glance rightly. His tone is stiff and hard, but Gaveston's word is a word not to be doubted at any time or under any circumstances. "Tomorrow—I shall see—I shall give orders. In the meantime you will do no good by staying here."

"But to leave him—*alone!*"

She is trembling, shivering. She goes back hurriedly to the miserable bed, where the dead man is lying with fixed, faded eyes staring always before him.

"Your son is alone too!" says Gaveston, in a loud, strange tone. "That man is dead—your son is alive! You sacrificed him when the man was living, will you"—violently—"sacrifice him still, even when the man is dead?"

But Cecilia can see nothing but the beloved face, the hand lying upon the quilt, as when last she held it—the silent, sightless eyes. She falls again upon her knees, and again her head sinks upon the hand that already is growing cold and stiff.

"Oh! my God!" says Gaveston.

The cry bursts from him, and something in it pierces to her soul. It has reached her, though, when all his other entreaties have failed. Trembling still, she rises to her feet, lays the dead hand carefully against the dead side, and with one last long look, bids her loved dead, farewell for ever.

"I will go home," says she.

* * * * *

The storm is still raging on their homeward drive. The heavens are alight with constant flashes, and the horses, startled and unnerved, swerve violently now and then from one side of the road to the other. In between are crashing showers of rain, and an Egyptian darkness—

"And now the heaven is dark, and bright, and loud,
With wind, and starry drift, and moon and cloud,"

and then again the darkness, and the violent rain, and lightning!

Gaveston's soul is full of bitterness. All bad things come back to him, making this black hour still blacker, and rendering him a prey to misery. Little things—absurd, insignificant at birth—now seem to grow to a huge height, and kill all softer memories behind! That day, for instance, that Mrs. Chance told him that she—(Cecilia is still “she” to him—our best-beloved, as well as our best-hated, are always very personal pronouns to us)—thought him ugly, comes back to him now, standing out clearly from quite a mass of much more important matter, with a singular distinctness. He had thought nothing of it then—he had, indeed, laughed at it as one of Cecilia's funny ways, but now——

Crash goes a clap of thunder, breaking off his thoughts for a moment. A moment only. Now they roll on again, swiftly as ever. What is it that Shakespeare says about women? “Soft, mild, pitiful and flexible.” Ay! she had been soft and mild enough, and flexible too, but pitiful—— No. There is no pity in her—for him, at least, or for her child, or——

A sharp sound of weeping—a violent, terrible outburst of grief comes to him from the opposite side of the carriage. It is as short as sharp. It was as the cry of a bird shot on the wing, and ceases as suddenly. Gaveston listens to it, waiting for a repetition of it—but no repetition comes. Having listened long enough to assure himself that there is no more to hear, he leans back again in his corner, with his back to the horses (he could not have sat next her), his thoughts having gained a keener edge from that strange outburst. What did it mean, that paroxysm of grief? What could it mean but confirmation strong of all that has gone before?

“No hinge, nor loop,
To hang a doubt on.”

And now they are at the Park gates, and now pulling up before the hall-door.

Gaveston leans forward.

“Try to collect yourself,” says he. He tells himself always that their little son's interests are before him, not hers, or his.

“Oh! dear Heaven!” says she. It is a mere whisper,

but full of all the weariness of this weary world. She rises, pulling her furs round her face as if to protect her from the vulgar gaze.

"You had better go to your room at once," says he, as he helps her to alight. Even in his scorn of her, he considers her comfort.

She moves past him, up the stairs, and into the corridor. Beyond her a light is streaming through the doorway. It is Nell's room, and as her light footfalls reach it, Nell's voice cries eagerly:

"Cissy—is that you, Cissy?"

But Cecilia, dead at heart, goes on, refusing to hear her, though Heaven alone knows what hours of anguish had gone by to make up the sum of that frightened, eager cry.

"Cissy—Cissy!"

Again the poor child, chained to her bed, calls aloud—now bitterly—hearing the steps go by, and Cecilia, pausing, listens—and as the misery of it becomes clear to her, through all her own misery, she turns back.

"You have come, darling," says Nell, holding out little, fragile arms to her. "Come here, Cissy! Come here to me. You will kiss me *now*!"

Cecilia leans over her, but to kiss her brings her somehow to her knees, and this attitude reminds her cruelly of that last sad scene.

"He is dead!" says she.

"Dead! Oh! poor, *poor* Phil!"

Not a word of admonition, or censure, or pity for herself! Only pity—pity pure and heartfelt, and most divine, for Phil. Cecilia, whose heart is feeling like a stone, creeps into the little sister's arms, and cries, and cries, as she has never cried before, and so her wounds find ease. And soon, sweet words persuade her, to "undress here, and steal in beside me," and with Nell's tender arms around her, she sleeps at last.

CHAPTER LX.

"In many a stead Doom dwelleth, nor sleepeth day nor night."

TIME, after this, for many weeks went but indifferently for the people at the Park. Gaveston rode, drove, sat on the Bench, and in his seat in church on Sundays as usual, but with a face changed almost beyond recognition. It seemed as if everything was outside and beyond him, far away, as it were, and as though he had no real connection with them. To his wife he was courtesy itself, but he never spoke to her unless compelled to do so, and he purposely avoided her society. He told himself she had ceased to be anything to him, that he no longer felt either love or hatred for her, and day by day this feeling grew. She could live in his house, and sit at the head of his table, but that was all. A great gulf yawned and separated her from him.

For all this Cecilia, at first, was sincerely grateful. To be forgotten, to be ignored by the man she had so wronged was what she most desired. To dwell upon her grief—to give herself up to it was all the comfort left to her. Again and ever again that scene by the dying man's bed came back to her, and again she knelt and pressed her cold lips upon the hand that was even colder. One trouble she had—a trouble so many know—and that was the difficulty of recalling the face of her dead. Hour after hour she would sit trying to think of Philip as he had been in life—as he had been in death—but always the face escaped her. It would not come back, and tormented by the longing to see him—even with her inward sight—she would pace her room backwards and forwards, with straining eyes, and hands tightly clasped.

But after a while this fever died away, and one day all at once she saw him quite clearly as he had been when living, and soothed by this consummation of her desire, she grew gradually calmer, and when many weeks had flown, the pain grew easier to bear. And it was then, perhaps, that, having been loved and tended with

such jealous care and affection all her married days, she began to feel the loss of the great love, that once had hedged her round.

She faded as the days went by, growing paler and more silent, and presently a sort of indifference took her, and she forgot her beauty even—and to clothe herself in those pretty garments that used to be her delight in earlier, lighter days.

And this vexed Gaveston, though he would not confess it, for what was she to him now? Mere

“Dust and ashes once found fair to see.”

Sometimes he told himself that if she had come to him then, when the man was dead, and flung herself upon his compassion, and told him all, he might have forgiven her. But he misjudged himself there. He would *not* have forgiven—he would have thrust her back, repulsing her, loathing the confidence—yet he had persuaded himself that she should have spoken! It was her part. Her silence hardened him, rendering him the more suspicious. Why did she not speak? Was it fear prevented her?

And this went on for many days; the artificial existence they were leading, telling upon them more morally perhaps than physically. “But as the days change, men change too,” and presently there fell that into their lives that roused them to a further sense of being; though it laid one of them very low, even at death’s door.

But before that came, Gaveston had found comfort of a sort. The child was always there with his pretty prattle and his happy ways, and the child was not to be repulsed, or set aside or ignored in any way. There was comfort in the small glad creature; and during the morning ride across the free, open common, with the boy beside him on his pony and the wild sea breeze tearing across their faces, and mingling with the merry laughter of the child, the desire of life came back to Gaveston—the love for the child falling like dew upon his crushed and wounded heart.

But for the child’s mother there was no softening, no forgiveness—only, a continuing and increasing wrath.

He put her deliberately from him, refusing to let him-

self dwell upon her. He gave her no place indeed in his thoughts, and if by chance he was compelled to think of her, as when he wondered at her new lack of daintiness in her frocks, or her obstinacy in refusing to say one word to him of her dead lover, he hurried over the thought as one does over matters hateful.

* * * * *

And now the world is uplifting itself once more, casting off its late sad trammels. There is an odour of newly-turned earth in the air, and the sweet winds crisp and strong are carrying news of a fresh birth to everything. Little twitterings come from beneath the branches, and louder twitterings still from the ivy that covers half the sides of the house, and the streams are running merrily down below, and that one must be a *fool*, who does not know that "spring has come up our way."

Here in the woods the little hands—those small, sweet, tiny, childish hands that help the All-Mother—are busy at work, digging and delving here, and picking and pushing there, until at last even her tinier pupils uplift their heads and stare out vaguely upon a fresh world. The baby fronds of the ferns, the delicate green blades of grass, the bursting buds upon the trees, all cry aloud to-day that spring—that *spring* has come.

Touches of the dead king winter are lying all around; but no one thinks of him now, or dreads him. The clear skies, the happy rushing winds speak only of hopes to come, and even where his foot trod heaviest, flowers are now awakening to the glad light of their god—the sun.

"Primroses now awake
'Neath the ruin of the withered brake
From nursing shades;
The crumpled carpet of the dry leaves brown
Availe not to keep down
The hyacinth blades.

The hazel hath put forth his tassels ruffed,
The willow's flossy tuft
Hath slipped him free,
The rose amid her ransacked orange hips
Braggeth the tender tips
Of bowers to be."

* * * * *

The spring is here indeed, and something more. Something horrible, a battle between life and death. At first no one took any heed of it. There was just a little cloud lying far away down there upon the horizon—but by degrees that little cloud strengthened and grew until now the whole Heaven is obscured by it. And the name of the cloud is Fever—Typhoid Fever!

Gaveston at once volunteered as a recruit in the small army of workers that arose to quell this scourge; and Cecilia of all people was the first to come forward and offer to help the nurses and other benevolent women, who were bent on dragging the lower classes—the pitiful ones of the earth—out of the fangs of death. Gaveston had broken through the silence that now always separated them, in an attempt at remonstrance with her about this; but she put him aside with a little gesture and a glance that dwelt in his memory for long afterwards. He had returned that glance with interest. It was made up entirely of reproach—and when three days later he himself gave in, and lay tossing on his bed (attacked by the fell disease that was destroying hundreds in their midst), that glance of hers still dwelt with him, and in his ravings took quite a prominent part.

For days and days he lay there fighting for his life; the doctor growing graver at every visit, and Cecilia, who would let no nurse divide her duties with her, looking paler daily and daily more hopeless.

CHAPTER LXI.

“Diseased nature oftentimes breaks forth
In strange eruptions.”

MRS. CUTFORTH-BOSS, half-an-hour after the news of Peter's illness had been disseminated through the neighbourhood, is standing on the hall-door steps of the Park. The manning mania has once more seized hold of Maria. From the first she had not shrunk from the fever or its consequences, and had indeed been one of Dr. Bland's most useful helpers. She knew no fear, and the fever never touched her.

"It," said Mrs. Wilding, chuckling maliciously, "avoided her, like *everything* else."

Meeting the doctor on the steps now, she informed him she had come to nurse Peter Gaveston, as she felt sure that that silly young woman, his wife, would be equal to nothing but hysterics, at a juncture like this.

But Dr. Bland, who had begun to form quite a high idea of Cecilia since the beginning of the fever in the country round, and who had noticed the quick and intelligent way in which she had grasped his meaning occasionally, and the deftness of the pretty, idle-looking fingers, and above all, the sympathy she had shown for even the worst and ugliest cases—made a stand.

No; Mrs. Gaveston was quite equal to the strain. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss herself must have noticed how admirably she had behaved all through this terrible time—especially in the case of those poor Browns.

"But this is different!" said the lady. "Her husband, you know—she will infallibly lose her grip with *him* to nurse, and then *I* shall come in."

"The greater the blow, the greater the strength sometimes," said Dr. Bland. "And, at all events, she wouldn't hear of it for a moment. She has even declined the offices of a nurse, and when I remonstrated with her about it, she said she would have one as a *help* if I insisted on it, but that *she* would be the head. That young lady has been spoiled by good fortune, ma'am," said the doctor, taking a pinch of snuff. He said snuff was better than a pipe—though he smoked freely—and that it kept sicknesses from getting into him. "If she had been brought up in a hard school, she would have been a shining light by now."

Poor Cecilia! *Her* school, though set in silks and laces, had been too hard for one poor human thing.

Maria, however, was not to be entirely baffled. She made up her mind there and then, that if she could not save Peter, she would at all events take home that spoiled boy of Cecilia's and save him. She went in therefore in spite of the doctor, and saw Cecilia, and made her proposition about Geoffrey, and Cecilia gladly accepted the offer, being thankful to get the child out of the way of infection.

So Mrs. Cutforth-Boss carried him off in triumph, and

only just in time, as Mrs. Wilding drove up on the same errand, even before Maria went away victorious with her prize. It must be confessed that Mrs. Wilding heaved a sigh of relief when she saw her go.

"Fast," some people in Bigley-on-Sea called Mrs. Wilding, and some of the others "vulgar." But the soundness of her heart was proved then. In fear and trembling—considering that she had a little, tiny, most beloved son at home—she had still driven forth to take away a neighbour's child, and bring it into her own house, with a view to saving his life!—a child that would perhaps bring infection with him, coming from a fever-stricken household.

The sigh with which she saw Maria depart with Geoffrey was most genuine, and she said "Thank God" under her breath, with perhaps a more prayerful feeling than she had ever known in her life before. Still she *would* have taken Geoffrey home.

Meantime, Mrs. Cutforth-Boss has driven off in triumph, with her prey. Here, now, is a clear case for management!

* * * * *

Before leaving the subject entirely, however, it may be as well—and indeed it is only fair to add—merely as a tribute to Geoffrey's mental strength—that long before his return to the parental roof *he* had most effectually managed Maria! That wonderful woman, who had ridden rough-shod over most of her acquaintances all her life, at last was reduced to abject slavery by one small boy.

When she tried to scold him, he cared nothing for her homilies, only laughed and clutched her round the neck, and kissed her. The child was hungry for kisses in those days, being denied the ones that had been his right from his birth. And when she told him that little boys should be seen and not heard, he laughed too, and threw his toys at her. By degrees he thoroughly demoralised her, and there came at last one awful day when the butler found her running races with him in the garden!

Over this, however, a veil should be drawn. It is, nevertheless, a legion in the Boss family, that once a butler of theirs was discovered on the verge of apo-

plexy. It was Mr. Cutforth-Boss who discovered him, but Maria indignantly repudiates the idea that *she* had anything to do with it—and, at all events, the butler, who recovered, did not betray her. But she was always afraid to dismiss him, so he is there still.

It was dreadful, the lengths to which Geoffrey used to go—even to the invading of Mr. Cutforth-Boss's sanctuary, and the examining of all the awful things therein.

It was a lovely place, he said, and so funny. With the queerest little things in bottles, and crawley-crawlies all over it. Mr. Cutforth-Boss afterwards, poor man, said he was afraid Geoffrey had eaten a good many of them, because only the wings could be found. But Maria cared for none of these things. She drew great stores of culture from the child, and learned from him many things that life up to this had failed to teach her. And from that visit forward, to the end of their friendship, which endured to the close of her life, Maria bowed herself before Cecilia's son.

* * * * *

And all this time Gaveston lay prostrate, whilst above him life and death fought for the mastery.

There had come a time when all seemed over, and when Cecilia who for twenty days had tended him day and night (taking but a little rest now and then) had fallen upon her knees beside his bed, and prayed herself into unconsciousness—then waked to pray again. He had lived through that time, had waked for a moment or two, and had seen and known his wife. She was bending over him at the moment, and his eyes slowly opening, had fixed themselves on hers. There was instant recognition in them, and a weird, terrible, sudden recollection of all that had gone before. It was as the recollection of a drowning man before he goes under for ever. Gaveston had looked straight into his wife's eyes, and two words had passed his lips.

"Too late!" he said.

The doctors decided that he had given himself up, and augured ill from it—but Cecilia knew, and the knowledge burned into her soul! He had meant to tell her that his dying came "too late," that if he had died a year or two ago, Stairs could have *honourably* sought

and married her. As he sank back into unconsciousness, she moved away her face as white as ashes.

Even with the shadow of death lying on him, he remembered! She had embittered his life, she was now embittering his death!

After that he rallied a little, causing a slight hope to arise—a vague one, and one they hardly dare to dwell upon—and now to-day the crisis is expected, and the doctors, hanging round his bed, or going backwards on tiptoe, to consult one with the other in the ante-room—now here, now there—make a sort of kaleidoscope to Cecilia, who, on her knees, is watching the pale, emaciated face upon the pillow in its strange sleep of exhaustion, that may mean life—or may mean death.

Downstairs, Nell, lying on her couch, is waiting—waiting! Dear Lord! how hard it is to wait, when the limbs are lifeless, and only the heart and head can move. Oh! to be with Cecilia now! to help her, to guard her, to wait with her! She, poor child, fretting on her sofa, feels as though she is going mad in her anxiety to go up there into the silent room—and know.

When he wakes—if ever he wakes again—will he know her—poor, poor Cissy—and forgive her? Surely her devotion during his illness should count for something. And that past madness—has she not suffered for it? How sad she must be now, how frightened.

Suddenly a spasm contracts her face. She—she is frightened too, but there is no one to help her either. Oh! dear—dear Heaven! send some relief—even a servant! Oh! if only she could rise and ring the bell—if she could only hobble so far. . . .

Heaven sends her some relief. The door is opened quietly—in the way that people open doors when sickness is in the house, even though the chamber of death be three flights away, and the door that is opened in the basement story, and Wortley comes in.

He had come over to hear the latest news—to be of some use to the stricken household if possible, but Nell seeing him, feels all at once that speech is beyond her, and after a hurried greeting he goes over to the window to wait there for the end. The poor child's painful anxiety is too pitiful to watch.

Tick, tick, goes the clock on the mantelpiece in a

dreadful monotone. It gets on Wortley's nerves at last, and makes him leave the window. He is, indeed, half way across the room, when flying footsteps down the stairs outside can be distinctly heard.

"He is dead!" says Nell.

Her voice sounds dull. She has raised herself on her elbow, and is looking at Wortley with livid lips, but eyes that are brilliant with fear and pain.

"No. No," says he.

The steps are nearer now.

"Oh, God! be *kind* to her!" cries Nell, softly praying.

And now the door is open, and Cecilia stands upon its threshold. She throws up her arms.

"He will live—he will live!" cries she, with a little burst of delirious laughter.

"Thank God!"

The words are on Wortley's lips, but he never utters them. He has turned his glance instinctively on Nell, and there—*there!*—

Great Heaven, she is *standing*—she is tottering forward—her hands outheld to Cecilia!

Wortley rushes to her, and in another moment she lies fainting within his arms.

But she had *stood!* She had make a step forward! To Cecilia, overwrought, this miracle proves too much. She bursts out crying.

CHAPTER LXII.

"Lying asleep between the strokes of night,
I saw my love lean over my sad bed."

THE battle of Peter between Life and Death is over. Life has won. And all because of his wife's devotion, attention and care, says old Dr. Bland, whenever he goes on his daily rounds through the neighbourhood.

"Why, my dear sir, we're getting on famously—famously," says he, as he now seats himself beside his patient's bed. "No more fears now. You can defy

everybody. How's the pulse, eh?—quite strong, I declare. No use bothering you about it again. 'Pon my word, I think it's your wife wants looking after now, gone to skin and bone, I say, and all through her devotion to you. You'll have to hurry up, my friend, if only to look after *her*. One good turn deserves another, you know!"

The little doctor ambles over to the window to pull a blind a little to one side, that is letting in the glittering spring sunshine too freely on his patient's face; but Cecilia has forestalled him.

"See now what an admirable nurse," cries the doctor gaily. "Even that little thing did not escape her. Come here, Mrs. Gaveston, and let me tell your husband who it was rescued him from the jaws of death."

"You!" says Cecilia faintly, and in a troubled tone, that all the lightness she tries to throw into it cannot well disguise.

"Who—I? Tut—tut—tut," says the doctor, protruding his lower lip, as he always does when protesting. "I tell you what, Gaveston, the doctor has always less to do with a recovery than the nurse; for the doctor can only give orders, and if the nurse doesn't carry them out, why, where is the patient then? I tell you it all lies in the hands of the nurse," and with a little wave of his hand to Cecilia, who has slunk back amongst the curtains and whose face cannot now be seen, "you must let me congratulate you upon yours."

"I thought there—was—a nurse—from——"

The voice is low and husky, and weak from the bed.

"From Guy's? So there was, but your wife just put her aside. She took the lead, and Mrs. Thompson told me only yesterday that she wished she had served under Mrs. Gaveston in her earlier days, and she would have learned more than she knows now. I daresay," says the doctor, laughing, "she was romancing a bit, but honestly, Gaveston, you owe your life, after Heaven, to your wife!"

As he says this he rises, and giving a few fresh instructions for the night to Cecilia, goes his way to carry comfort, or hope, or despair to other houses.

When he has gone, silence falls upon the sick room. Cecilia, still standing half hidden by the bed-curtains,

waits patiently for the moment that will tell her Peter has fallen asleep. When quite fifteen minutes have gone by filled with the restless turnings, and the querulous twistings, that belong to the wearied sick, and now the quietness tells her he is again sleeping, she emerges from her hiding-place, and, sinking softly, slowly on her knees by the bedside, lays her tired head upon the pillow close to that of the man who has cast her from him, as unworthy.

For a long time she kneels here; first with her eyes upon the silent face, and then—then thoughts crowd round her, and at last her pretty head drops, her lids grow heavy, and . . .

"Why did you do it?"

The words come to her through a veil, the veil of long wanted sleep, but presently she sits up and thrusts the veil aside, and looks eagerly into the eyes of the man lying upon the pillow.

"Do what?"

"Bring me back to life."

Cecilia makes no reply. A wave of bitterness passes over her. She lays her head back again upon the pillow near him, and softly, suddenly, without premeditation of any sort, and with a sudden instinct, lays her arm across his throat.

It lies there for a moment, and then he stirs. Feebly—with difficulty—he lifts one hand, as though to push away that other hand from his throat; and, indeed, for a terrible minute she fears that that is his intention, but when his fingers have closed upon her wrist, whatever he may have meant to do at first, he takes no further course, and his fingers remain there.

Presently he moves them up and down her arm, slowly—vaguely.

"You have grown thin?"

"Not so thin as you have."

"Oh! I!" His faint voice is expressive of utter weariness, and through it she knows that he is wishing he were a little thinner still, and at rest, and dead! A feeling of misery too great to be borne sweeps over her. She must give voice to it.

"Peter! may I speak to you?"

"To what end?"

"Silence is killing me! *May* I speak?"

He makes her no answer, and with his head turned from her she cannot read his face, but after a little while, a faint pressure of his fingers on her wrist seems to give her the desired permission.

"I want to tell you—to say to you . . . Peter," desperately, "you must believe me! I—what I have to say is that I never knew how much I cared for you—what a positive necessity you were to me—until I nearly lost you! You," in a stifled tone, "you *must*—you *do* believe me, don't you?"

"Ah! He is dead now!"

"It isn't that!"

"And I should have been dead before you ever met me!"

"Peter! Peter!" Perhaps the anguish in her voice reaches his dull senses, that hardly yet have wakened from the sleep that death had so nearly sealed, because now his voice, if fainter, has less bitterness in it.

"You loved him?"

She lets this go by, but he repeats it, the hot feverish hand now burning upon hers in a tightened clutch, that in good health would have been a most masterful hold.

"Yes!" The word is low but clear. How could he have expected another answer? And if another had been given what could it mean but falsehood, and yet—strange human nature—he resents it. Now the feeble hand *does* try to push her from him, but she, catching hold of the neck of his night-gown, refuses to be thrust aside.

"That is all over," says she quietly—miserably. "And . . . show some pity, Peter. I have no one but you, now."

"Ay! *Now!*" There is a pause, but presently he speaks again. "You have the child."

"I want the child's father too."

Another long silence! She is crying, bitterly, silently—but now some despairing thought comes to her, and she breaks into low, but violent sobbing.

"Peter—*can't* you forgive me?"

Again she waits, and again that feeble hand closes upon hers, with a touch that contains hatred, she tells herself. Ah! this time she will not resist him! He

can spurn her now if he will—he may cast her from him. . . . He——

Slowly he has taken, and slowly he lifts the little trembling hand, and as she waits with beating heart to have it cast back to her—this poor weak olive branch—he draws it to him, nearer—nearer—until the palm is lying on his lips!

Trembling, weeping, she at last dares to look at him.

He has turned his face to the wall, as if to hide it away from all men. And from beneath his closed and sunken lids two slow tears are stealing down his gaunt cheeks. But his kiss is still warm upon Cecilia's palm!

She feels as if her heart is breaking!

Silently the moments fly. She, kneeling beside his bed, and he with his face averted, but always with her hand against his lips—and no word spoken. After a little while she knows he has fallen asleep—the heavy sleep of exhaustion, that is so often the sleep of returning health.

Cecilia, softly releasing her hand, gets up from her knees and bends over him. There is a new look upon his face—a look that has not been there for many a day. There is hope in it, and a strange sweet peace!

CHAPTER LXIII.

“Through thick and thin, both over bank and bush,
In hopes her to attain by hook or crook.”

“HERE we are again!” cries Summer, that pretty clown, springing into our midst, almost without a word of warning. The hot, glad sun is glinting upon the full-leaved beeches and all the world seems “afire with roses.”

Spring has passed away. Our vestal virgin that “goeth all in white,” and now here is June—mad, rampant, laughing all the day, and far into the night, and waking—only to laugh again.

Gaveston's return to life had been a matter of much delight to many people, for Peter in his quiet way had

been very universally liked. His wife's devotion to him in his illness had proved a nine days' wonder, and had at once lifted the volatile Cecilia to quite a high position in public opinion—perhaps higher than she even aspired to, or than perhaps she deserved. But what took Bigley-on-Sea by storm, what dwarfed its interest in Peter's recovery, and Cecilia's astonishing wifely devotion, was the fact of Nell's strange recovery.

The big man from town had been brought down again, and had again formed an opinion on Nell's case—a highly favourable one this time, and having pocketed his fee (he was quite as surprised at her miraculous recovery as the least scientific person in Bigley, only he did not say so), had reminded them that he had always said: "Leave it to time. To time, Mr. Gaveston!"

Mr. Gaveston nodded, keeping his thoughts to himself. And then the big man had ordered this for Nell—and that—and the other thing, but at all events in spite of him Nell grew stronger daily, and now in this sweet month of June is able to get about again—slowly certainly, and with many halts, and the help of a stick, but always with the next day's performance better than the last.

Mrs. Chance, who is ever on the alert, and as wide awake as an owl at midnight on the prowl for a mouse, had written to Alec from time to time, giving very vague hints of Nell's improvement, until that improvement was sure. And now *very* urgently—seeing that Sir Stephen's visits are still as frequent at The Park, "as when out of his charity" (as Bella insisted on saying) "he went to see that poor crippled girl!"

She had compelled herself to believe this, refusing to acknowledge, even to herself, that Wortley's visits there had a deeper significance.

Last week she wrote again to Grant desiring him to come at once, and try his fate once more with Nell. And Grant, only too eager to tempt it, had come to-day, and encouraged by many words of Bella's, has walked over to Gaveston Park to find Nell lying in a long chair on the sunny side of the garden. Deep in cushions, and looking lovely if a little fragile still, and with the fresh touch of life's colours on her lips and in her eyes.

Wortley is seated near her, Cecilia hovering round,

whilst Gaveston and his little son, at a rustic table, are pouring out the tea. Just now Cecilia, within the circle of her own family, is popularly supposed to be able to do nothing, but enjoy herself and look lovely. The latter she does to perfection, and for the other, the gay little smile that wreathes her lips at times speaks well for it. A secret—the barest—and besides it is only “the family” that knows a word of it—is afloat, that, later on, before the hard snows fall, Geoffrey’s dainty nose will be out of joint. The idea that it may be a little daughter that is to be added to the riches of the house, has taken Nell’s fancy by storm, and enthrals her imagination at times. A daughter for Cissy! A son was very good! But a little *girl*!

Grant, crossing the shaven sward to where Nell is lying, is received with great friendliness on all hands. Nell, indeed, seems enchanted to see him; she makes a place for him on her lounge, pulling her skirts aside to give him room, and devotes her whole attention to him. And the young man’s heart, seeing her so well, although still so undoubtedly invalided, swells within him.

That Sir Stephen is always beside her, troubles him at first, but when after awhile Wortley moves away, his heart grows lighter, and he tells himself that Wortley has seen how it is, and is giving him a clear field—that he knows the game is up, and so on.

Here Cecilia brings Nell her tea, and Grant, starting to his feet, hurries across to the little rustic table to bring her some cake.

“No. No,” says she, shaking her charming head, with a smile that is as pretty as it can be. And then she lifts herself a little so as to look over Grant’s shoulder, and says to some one beyond—in a clear, distinct tone:

“Stephen! Why don’t you bring me my bread and butter?”

Something! What is it? Or was there really anything? Something there must have been, for all at once Grant knows that there is no hope for him—that he has no chance with her—that he is less than nothing to her—and that Wortley is all the world!

As soon as it is possible to him, he rises, and bids her good-bye—if he had a last lingering doubt, the fact that

she accepts his going, kindly but indifferently, and never so much as asks him when he is coming again, or how long his leave lasts, or where he will be to-morrow, destroys it.

Cecilia and Gaveston accompany him to the gate, where he parts with them, with a last backward glance towards the garden, that shows him Nell laughing prettily at Wortley—who is, however, looking a little grave and disturbed.

Grant's walk back to his sister's house is filled with thoughts that can scarcely be called pleasant. Those that relate to Bella are, indeed, distinctly unpleasant, and there are moments when he curses himself for his stupidity in being brought to such a pass as this. Bella had distinctly given him to understand that Nell—(*dear little Nell!* for her there is not, even at this heart-broken juncture, a thought that is not altogether loving)—was still free to be wooed and won, and yet half-an-hour in her presence was sufficient to prove to him that her heart was given irrevocably away.

A furious rage against Bella is tearing at his heart as he enters her presence.

"Well?" says she hurriedly. The hope in her tone is evident as she turns to him, but it is extinguished as her eyes meet his.

"*Well?* Nothing is well! I don't know what you meant by telling me what you did this morning."

"Wasn't she glad to see you then?"

"In the sense *you* mean—No!"

"She is a vile coquette then," says Mrs. Chance, with a viperous tightening of her lips.

"She is no such thing," says Grant, almost violently. "And once for all, I may as well tell you that I will hear no word said against her by you, or by anyone."

"You are very complaisant, I must say. You defend her, though she, at the last moment, has thrown you over. Even though you came so many miles to see her, she was not even—as you say—glad to see you?"

"You make a mistake there! She *was* glad to see me. Too glad. Indifferently glad! I should think," says Grant, with a touch of angry reproach, "that any-one with an eye in her head could have seen that she is in love with Wortley."

"She is not!" Bella has changed colour.

"You will tell me next, perhaps, that he is not in love with her?"

"He is *not*!" The same phrase falls from her working lips, but now even more vehemently. "She was ill—he was kind—that is all!"

Grant shrugs his shoulders.

"So much for *your* penetration," says he. He is too much engaged over his own miseries to give heed to the terrible disappointment that is beginning to show itself in her face. "They are as good as engaged in my opinion, if not so already."

"*Your* opinion! What is it worth, I wonder? Engaged! They are *not* engaged! I could almost swear they aren't. Maria would not *hear* of it for one thing."

"Maria does not work this world," says Grant. "And look here. Your saying she is not in love with him, wouldn't hold water for a moment. She"—groaning—"is *that* in love with him, that she can't even eat bread and butter unless he gives it to her."

"Splendid evidence!" says Bella scornfully. "What a fool you are!"

"Evidence enough for me anyway!"

"You ought to wait! To go back. To-morrow she . . ."

"I used to think you a clever sort of girl," says Grant slowly. "You are right, I *am* a fool. No, I shall not go back, and I shall not wait. To stay forlorn round here, is a trifle too much for *me*. And as for to-morrow, I'm off to Ireland by the ten o'clock train."

"So like you," says his sister, her face pale with fear and rage combined. "You haven't the courage to gain your point. I tell you she *doesn't* care for Sir Stephen. And as for him, why I know he has the *worst* opinion of her—"

"Oh, rot!" says her brother, walking out of the room, and slamming the door behind him.

Even now Bella, who has great staying powers, will not acknowledge to herself that the game is at an end. Maria! Surely Maria will see a way out of this difficulty, if, indeed, difficulty there be. It seems impossible to believe that Stephen is really anxious to marry that *ridiculous* girl, with her frivolous airs, and a back hope-

lessly crippled, in spite of what the biggest doctors in Europe may say.

To run upstairs and put on her jacket and her bonnet—she always wears a bonnet as being more decorous, she says—as a fact hats don't become her—and to walk down to Cutforth Hall takes barely half an hour, and Maria being found in the library arranging her husband's books—she always managed her husband's books when *he* refused to be managed as it took him days afterwards to re-arrange them—Bella pours out her grievance with eloquent tongue.

"It is impossible, isn't it? You wouldn't hear of it, would you? Just consider! *That* girl of all others. No man's name, or comfort, would be safe with her. Why"—angrily—"don't you *spe*ak, Maria? You have so often told me that you would not sanction such an engagement, that . . ."

"I've said a lot of things in my time," says Maria, solemnly, flicking the duster to and fro, and occasionally very close to Bella's nose. "And so have you, I daresay. But I have learned to believe, that neither you nor I can prevent Stephen doing just as he likes, either in the way of choosing a wife, or anything else."

"You mean to give in, then?" gasps Bella. "To let him destroy his whole life by marrying this girl. Oh!" She pauses as though too over-filled with righteous indignation to give voice to another syllable. But presently she rallies. "And you——" Her eyes are now flashing with a fire that has something vindictive in it. "You, who profess to be a leader of men—to manage the people round you!"

She has turned her glance full on the great Maria, as though expecting and preparing for an explosion from her—but to her surprise it never comes. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, as though not hearing her, is looking up at the cornice, and drumming her fingers on the table. She is evidently lost in thought. Not unpleasant thought, by any means, judging by the curves of her masculine lips.

"And you really think there is something in it," says she at last. "That Stephen actually means to marry her?" She brings her eyes down from the cornice to

look at Bella, and once again hope revives in that intriguer's breast.

"Oh! beyond doubt. Beyond *any* doubt. Alec says it is plain. Unless—unless someone comes forward to prevent Stephen from taking this fatal step, he will undoubtedly marry Miss Prendergast within the year." She looks eagerly at Maria. Surely this is strong enough. *Now* she will come to the rescue. Maria has gone back, however, to her calculations and is again smiling. After a moment she says slowly:

"Nell Prendergast is Geoffrey's aunt! After all then, that boy will belong to me in some sort of a way, before—as you say—the year is out!"

Nell's relationship to the child has all at once reconciled her to the marriage. Surely it is children who sway the world!

Bella, with one withering glance at Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, rises to her feet. The game is up.

"Ah! one can see *now*," says she in her softest, most deliberate tones, and with her little hesitation very distinct, but with a glance that is meant to cut the other to the very heart's core, "what a grief it has been to you to have *no children of your own!*" She waits to see the effect of this shot, but Maria can always be depended on, when dynamite is about.

She regards Mrs. Chance for a moment with a searching eye and then——

"'Those who live in glass houses——'" quotes she, pointing a bony finger at her—"should not throw——' What, going already?"

But Bella vouchsafes no reply—marching out of the room, she closes the door finally behind her. The next day sees her far from Bigley-on-Sea, and I don't know that anyone there has up to this regretted her.

CHAPTER LXIV.

"She also came and heard,
O my joy,
'What,' said she, 'is this word?
What is thy joy?'

"And I replied, 'O see,
O my joy,
'Tis thee,' I cried, 'tis thee;
Thou art my joy.'"

WORTLEY here in the garden with Nell is feeling sad and depressed. The true lover is ever slow to believe in himself or his own chances, and the advent of Grant, younger than he is by some years, and handsome, and earnest—so very evidently in earnest—has damped his spirits. Up to this, ever since her illness, Nell has seemed so altogether his own that he can scarcely bear now to see another come in to divide his honours with him. It was nothing to him that the girl had refused cake from Grant, and had accepted bread and butter from him, though if he had heart to remember, he might have consoled himself with the recollection, that Nell is as fond of a cake as a child of five.

But Grant had come, looking so handsome, so brilliant, and the girl had received him with such sweet cordiality as seemed to Wortley but the continuation of a love begun in happier days.

Besides being modest, the true lover is always a little stupid. And Wortley's stupidity goes so far, that even now when Grant has gone—escorted to the gate by Cecilia and Gaveston, who quite understand his state of mind and are truly sorry for him—he cannot see that Nell is in a way relieved, and glad of his departure. The fact that this relief takes the form of silence, perhaps adds to his mystification.

For a long time he does not speak, and then at last—seeing that neither Cecilia nor Gaveston mean returning, and that the night air is drawing near with a chill

within its train, he so far rouses himself as to say gruffly:

"It is growing too late for you to be out here. You must come in."

"Yes. I think so," says Nell. She gets up from her cushions, always so carefully arranged for her upon her garden chair, and with the help of her stick takes a step forward, then she catches hold of the arm of the chair, laughing softly, if a little nervously.

"My feet don't seem quite my own yet," says she, "I have sat here too long, perhaps. And this stick is no good—you must give me your arm, I'm afraid."

"You have sat out here far too long," growls he. "I don't know how they let you do it. As for that stick——"

He puts it aside in a masterful way, and taking her up in his arms, carries her—as he has so often done before in her hopeless days—through the open window, into the drawing-room.

Here he lets her go, slowly, until her feet touch the carpet, and even then . . . it seems so *hard* to let her go.

All at once, as she feels his arms loosen, they tighten round her again, and she knows that he is straining her passionately to his breast.

"*How* can I let you go?" says he. His tone sounds suffocated. "But I'll have to. I know it. I knew it this evening when he came again. There, don't mind me."

He releases her, and would have pressed her tenderly into a lounging chair near, but she, closing her slender fingers on the sleeve of his coat, prevents him. Leaning back from him, she looks up into his face, and he looks down at her, with his strong, kind, rather ugly face, very white and set.

There is a long, long pause, and then at last:

"*Don't* let me go!" says she.

She almost pushes him from her when the dreadful words are said, and I think she would have fallen but that he catches her and holds her.

"Nell!"

His voice is trembling, his heart beating with an *almost* cruel haste. He is bending over her, pressing

his cheek against the pretty head now lying on his breast.

"Nellie!" says he again. But she is crying nervously now, and it is quite a minute or so before she can be got to speak. And then her abasement knows no depths.

"Oh, yes, I know. No wonder you are shocked! as you *are*—as you *must* be! It—it was a proposal. Oh! I don't know *how* I did it!"

There are several intervals that need not be recorded, as all true lovers can fill them in for themselves, and presently she grows comforted, and a little gleam of her old self steals forth.

"It *was* a proposal, for all you may say," says she. But the pretty saucy smile breaks out here, and there is a twinkle in the dewy eyes that argues considerable life for him in the coming days, "I hope you are not going to—*refuse me!*"

* * * * *

An hour later they are still as full of conversation as though the day had just begun. Truly, the genius of lovers is wonderful.

"I shall take you abroad myself. No one could look after you as I could. We'll speak to Cecilia."

He had never called Mrs. Gaveston Cecilia until this moment, but already he regards her as a sister.

"Yes; and really after all, I don't want a nurse any more."

"Even if you did, I'd be your nurse."

At this they both laugh.

"A nice nurse *you'd* be," says Nell. Then all at once her mood changes, and she looks up at him with anxious eyes. "Do you remember now how you used to scold me—to find fault with me?—I'm just the same now, you know, as I was then."

"That is what I like to think," says he.

"Is it?" She pauses, as if meditating upon this. "You," after a bit, "thought me troublesome!"

"I like that thought too. The more troublesome you are, the more I shall have to do for you."

"There was one day when you said——"

But she never gets to the end of that sentence.

"Look here," says he, "I won't have all my crimes brought up against me like this. It's beastly unfair—"

that's what *I* call it—and after all you ought to be generous over my faults, because it was pure despair of ever gaining you that drove me to the brutalities you mention."

He laughs—but she does not—and after a moment she leans towards him, and pulls him to her with both hands.

"You do love me then? You *do*?" asks she.

There is so much honest doubt in her voice that it shocks him. Can't she *see*?

"My darling——"

"No, no, no," pushing him away. "As you," vehemently, "never *have* loved, and never *could* love anyone again?"

"I thought it was plain, my sweetheart," says he reproachfully. "But there is this, Nell, that all the world and everything in it, is of no account to me, except you, and *your* love for me, and *my* love for you!"

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